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The Varmints

The Varmints

PEGGY BENNETT

1947

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The Varmints

I

Largo by the Sea

A Prologue

Are you, then, the living representatives of the Holy Ghost, the unspeakable answer to the question mark of the universe? What are you in, and compared with, the universe? Who are you, Pivot? (You've wrought miracles, you.)

Perhaps you've straddled the joggling rafters of an old deserted barn and known the bucolic ghosts, you goony loons. You have read, no doubt, the damp masticated and printed wood pulp called the morning paper, wielding its unwieldly pages (the tabloid excepted from the clumsy kinds) impatiently, eager for the greasy crumbs of news the newspaper empires have selected for you, have written for you from the moral slant of a particular newspaperman or an editor, each intensely human and subject to his share of human stupidity and roughhewn grammar. You know the world, you do.

The comic strips, twentieth-century fairy tales, manage to absorb part of your consciousness, to keep your susceptible minds off that filthy vague excrement smelling on the front page, and the sports pages are exceedingly enlightening. You compose a record

crowd in innumerable halls and stadiums. A good crooner is worth a dozen or ten dozen ordinary hard-working citizens, and a cute little smug chubby round-jowled chow is infinitely funnier than a baby, and not half so much trouble in the bargain. You spend most of your spare time seeking entertainment. You listen to music so that you may hear voices in the pure and abstracted form, exactly like no human voices, and yet so like your very own that you are entranced, hypnotized (you can easily hypnotize yourself). Is music a refuge? Is art an escape? You may argue that it is, on the contrary, a new and better way of living. Ah, those beauties, those pearls of emotional wisdom. In their moments you may espy eternity, and then you must go on with business as usual, pursuing careers and fat paychecks, bathing away perspiration and other odors, ejecting wastes from your bodies, mincing and devouring those strange concoctions you recognize as your food, worrying, changing with the weather, lusting a little for power, falling prey to riots of bacteria, dying ignominiously natural human deaths, decaying insensibly.

Each of you was born of a woman after a union of sperm and ovum, though you remember your mothers as saints in haircurlers and your fathers as preoccupied men, or your mothers as emotional monsters and your fathers as old goats, or otherwise entirely. It matters intensely; or perhaps you think it matters not.

You are each of you a sex, and spend most of your energies bidding and vying for positions in luminary clusters, each of you subconsciously seeking to be a

nucleus of radiation, fit to ravish or be ravished by an angel. You do not know it, but you still believe in heaven, whether you have renounced it or not. Heaven is a human heritage, just as God is a restatement of human hope and vitality: the belief that there are order in the universe and the universes and a final meaning to endless space. Some people (subconsciously) believe that they can find heaven on earth. Others do not, a reversal of procedure: not death in ecstasy, but ecstasy after death.

But your Gods are all of too human a grandeur, and the angels' wings drag on the earth. You are a Baptist or nothing, a Catholic or nothing, a Hindu or nothing, and so on. Men of other beliefs are heathens to be subjected to moral aggressions. Some of you claim to be nothing, which is a form of poppycock. It means that you are too lazy or too frustrated to essay an expression of your creed. A most unsocial attitude. You who can plumb no answers have headaches.

You have readily patronized the motion picture industry and watched the puppets being drawn through the fantastic folds of drama, in which simple home life is shown as an extravaganza, complex human emotions and relationships are shown as simple shallows, and dreamworld sex is the perpetual motive, the neverdying underlying theme. All sentiment suddenly becomes a heavy inhuman fog, or perhaps a chocolate bar melting in the sun. The ethereal seems indelibly neurotic, and vulgarity synonymous with health. Suffering is made a form of nobility, pain pleasurable, and greatness a simpleton's struggle to

be himself in the midst of evil. Evil is anything (either brilliant and human or stupid and inanimate) that trips up the inspired fool. The obscure music lubricates the creaking mechanisms of the drama and steals upon the listener unawares, massages him as he sits passively in the cushioned seat. The strange eerie flat gray world now comes brilliant in unearthly splashy and splotchy technicolor, but still flat, mosaic. Now you think of yourselves as weirdly beautiful faces and torsos, curving curvaceous legs, tantalizing smoothness and roundness of breasts and thighs and hips or of hard male flatness and narrow hips and iron muscle, and you are moving in close-ups, slow-motion, or in long-range action shots, lightning fast. Voluptuous throes of emotion; how exquisite it is to writhe in make-believe passion.

Perhaps you'd rather spend your evenings listening to the warm cordial atmospheres generated by your radio. Genial men flatter your good taste, introduce you to personages chummy, winningly idiotic, noble and highspirited, and so on. Unlike prosaic diurnal living, whose genuine people move with masks on their faces and can be judged only by the sums of their lives, radio personalities come in types as variable as stovepipes. How fondly we remember our adolescence all day long. Periodic soulshaking and mirthquaking rhythms of studio laughter. Impressive sounds, some of them, seeming to assure you that somewhere in the world life must be tremendously diverting, exceptionally exciting, and all good clean fun in the meantime.

God, how great are these United States. Yes,

you're a pretty great people, you are. And even, now and then, truth reaches you with the penetrating power of a very quiet voice.

But let us get personal. We will present to you witnesses and testimony of your reality. We all know Wisconsin. Now consider Wisconsin. The Paul Bunyan kind of country, where sleek cattle, maps of Europe and the world on their backs in black and white designation, tiny vestiges of horns butting out of their high sloping foreheads, range the neat fat landscapes beneath continents of clouds, vast sky empires — great white bulls in old-man solitude in their respective fields, womanly cows in harem perspective. From the highways can be seen huge black or roan or pearly workhorses noisily slobbering over the oat troughs beside fat red barns and silos. All the fall produce is of a Gargantuan nature. Corn in geometric precision mounts and descends the flatted hills, the tassels held high. Peaches are plump and without bitterness. Trees are grand and hale, and tobacco curing takes place in mammoth barns. And the produce of human cohabitation keeps pace with the development of immense fine tomatoes and rich pure milk: the children are the sturdiest in the world, the girls as plump and beautiful as ripe peaches, with big features and faces like moons, the boys like tree trunks. They spill out of big roomy white houses, two and three stories and cellar, porches and spreading lawn. Monstrous dahlias in gorgeous barbaric colors hang their heavy heads in dooryards. And across the rolling fields and their incomparable grandeur of relaxed fertility, their mounds of shining hay and fat

red barns and huge machinery, are lakes of exquisite blues, flanked by goldenrod and purple and white daisies. This is Wisconsin in September, picture-card Wisconsin. And there are towns like Whitewater, whose grass is greener, whose elms are taller and straighter, whose parks are more carefully kept, than others in the world. Houses present a solidarity of composure that speaks of a spirit of wholesome informality, good nature, well-being in the tender light of dawns or in the wild hues of approaching twilights. Are there psychological monsters in any of those houses? Do fugitives from reality flee Wisconsin? Are there suicides there? Can fat people entertain misery?

At seven o'clock in the evening, in the mountainous corner of North Carolina near Asheville, Vassie Allen took her tortured body for a walk. She could no longer bear the jocular talk in the lighted kitchen. She thought stringently, "Nobody knows what I go through." A rectal irritation coupled with her nervousness, and the sensitive body trunk contained a burning thread of pain. Distractedly she saw the taut dark blue skin of the horizon over the valley thighs in this land of leaping and cascading verticals. She paused at the mollusk foot of the mountain. She repeated all the simple soothings she could muster. The recurrent thought she faltered was: "This pain can't last forever."

Whereas in Los Angeles, California, city of the angelic airs, at three o'clock in the morning, Robert, the negro chef in the Golden Slipper, a nightclub, cut off his thumb with the meat ax. He laughed softly

and apologetically, but his face was striped with pain. That the man was supposed to be in pain dawned so quietly in the room, on the kitchen people as they moved about like well-timed automata well-wrapped within themselves that meanwhile blood was smeared over the breadpan, sluiced upon the white flesh of the breadboard, trailed upon the floor, and a few drops were left sizzling on the hot stove. (Then his canker was removed as if by anæsthetized surgery from Joe, the surly manager. And pity moved in May, the hardboiled gumsmacking hipslinging waitress, until her rouged cheeks became lighted with a tender nobility. For an hour or so she moved like a queen among the hornets' nest of small crowded tables in the smoky lights. Several lilting men, a little drunk and flustered it is true, found her quite exciting and beautiful, and she was assured of a good offer.) Meanwhile Robert refused to be in pain, a mind already satiated with pain.

In New York City at 12:30 p.m., Stabe, the hirsute Russian immigrant, soared abruptly from his seat at the kitchen table, slouched deliberately across the room, stumbling on the woodbox by the wayside, and slapped his dark thin wife Ida sprawling to the cold greasy bare floor. The drama was as of Gamling, with whom Stabe was already inebriated, aside from being spellbound by his own multiple identity with God. "Slaut," he howled with great reaches of his arms, his fingers gripping gorillalike at the air. Then he looked into her frozen face. A tremendous disquiet took place in his great barrelhooped soul, so that he returned to his seat and drank a redhot po-

tion again. (Instead of hanging quietly in his miserable economic uncertainty, he raved upon the barbs, making the wounds deeper and more searching.) Dark children slept on the slipshod bed. The mattresses disgorged their contents onto the floor. If the Japanese titter in their grief, the uncontrollable passion of their distant cousin must have been the extreme of laughter.

Portland, Oregon. At eight o'clock, opposite the dark yawning mouth of the befogged alley, she saw him emerge, whited as if by flour by the brilliant streetlight's streaming through the myriad globules, and she could see that he was beast. So she tried to scream. But it was no use, was like a child battling a steamroller, and she woke up paralyzingly sore on a hospital bed the following day.

Houston, Texas. When the word "rationalization" is pronounced, even strong men are apt to flinch a little, and weak ones to quiver. One must believe there is a direct and right response to any situation. Marie smothered her unrequited love until no emotion was real to her. Imaginary suicide was a well rehearsed routine with her. Under the pressures of jeering cynical dead monotonous laughter from the party-gathered inmates of the room, she drove herself to the window. Then she heard the stroke of midnight within her, and a strange exhilaration, as if at last love was returned to her and an angel lover possessed her. On inspired impulse, as befitting the merging of soul with soul, this noon she flung herself out of the third-story window. As her foot left the ledge a flash of remorse sounded her, and like a cat

fished from a river, she might have clung to any obstacle, though until that time it had seemed like a matter of simple willing with a terrible almost blithe disregard of doubts and petty fears. She hurtled down to kiss the flat pavement's stony cheek. While the ambulance raced shrieking through the night streets, back in the quieted room a drunken stupefied disheveled woman played over and over again on the phonograph, "A diamond pin and a watch and chain, A little black moustache," until the lonely stenographer in a tight little neighboring room sobbed into her pillow to relieve her nervous tension.

This list could be extended to doomsday, and no one would be the wiser, except some poor conscience-stricken fool who finds his egotistical unit detracted from by the very acknowledgment of the existence of another — close by, no matter where he goes — and yet, perhaps, finds a kind of unction in his realization, an increased understanding, and finally comfort in being one in so many, a cog.

O, there are so many million characters in this world (the Chinese alone account for . . .), and all of them so heroic that a Voltaire might be forgiven for realizing in the Hero a monument to human stupidity. You brutes and chattering idjits and playboys and Methodist hymntrillers, and the rest of "youse" and "yawl," what must the ventriloquist make you say? (How can he forget his responsibility? Which is, after all, only to do as he sees fit. How many good men are just far cleverer than the rest! Goodness is the cleverest adaptation. How many men are stupid enough to be evil and beastly, to go against the moral

grain! The rest of us swelter in consternation, in suspense, hardly able to make up our own minds.

A man is suing the local railroad company for twenty-five thousand dollars. He was standing around some chicken crates with a vagrant air, his mug of a face bristling with black whiskers, oil, and soot, and he was vibrant with peeps. On closer scrutiny the railroad attendants found a broken slat in one of the crates, and putting two and the hobo appearance and the staccato peeps together, made a telephone call, and in no time had secured a warrant to search him. Now he is suing the railroad company for defamation of character: he was a ventriloquist. Say, whom may we sue if we now engender suspicion with our peeps?)

So we must turn now, because we have put it off too long, to the few selected characters who wait, in flesh and lifesize vigors and wealth of human power and illusions and cussedness, to be robbed of their very essences by these words, and to be conversely endowed with essences spiritually similar, but more elaborate and more deprived and more depraved and still more grand.

Their breeding place is not Whitewater, but Tupelo. And their stomping-ground is not Wisconsin, but northwest Florida, that little joint of land where the cornstalks, if they grow at all, are spindly embarrassing things, and the scrub pine and cabbage palmetto bear eloquent testimony to the aridity of the land. The Spanish oaks wear long beards of moss, and the marshes spread their pelts of fur between

ribbons of tranquil creeks. Wild skunks and hogs abound, and the scrawny cattle roam the highway unmolested, looming up at night in front of moving headlights and staring with lofty countenance rendered somewhat ridiculous when added to the ripple-marks of their ribs and jutting hipbones, and finally moving off with quiet snorts of contempt.

Houses made of paper, shacks of rusty corrugated tin, houses with the sunken features of age ornamented with large Coca Cola advertising art (bathing beauty in yellow swimsuit poised against an enigmatic backdrop of tomato red) nailed to their sides are as omnipresent as their pale and wide-eyed young phantom children testify (children usually either wizened and scabby-blond, or brown and ramrod-skinny and pulled into grotesque torques of posture, sometimes children whitely fat, porky, suggesting unhealthy metabolism). There is about these children a terrible ferocity, equaled by a terrible shyness and inferiority feeling, and their eyes are so old! But pshaw! Not all the children are like that. There are homes where the electric irons and refrigerators and gas stoves play prominent roles, and where children are as pampered and innocent as anywhere else in the world, and there are leafy and tranquil little towns like Tupelo.

Ye who dream and find being in dreaming, Ye who are world-weary and find the energy of cities a wasteland and the glitter the whole miracle of the gold, Ye to whom the soul-maiming surgery of intense personal ambition has been revealed atrocious,

Ye whose sensibilities have been worn smooth and frictionless, Ye ready for the dump-heap, Ye disillusioned, Ye burned-out beings, come to Tupelo.

(You could eat out your heart here, you could beat out your brains. You could cry *de profundis,* and people would look at you with an astonished stare, and you would see hostility and suspicion dawn in their eyes, but they would leave you alone. Who wants to be left alone?)

At the junction of Main Street of the township Tupelo and perpendicular U. S. Highway 319, a rectangular marble stone up-ended on one of its smaller sides stands amid torrent and stony hail and frigid night air and sunny light to remind people who have wandering eyes for it that Cato Foreman III died in the first, or minor, or preludatory, world war. Past the memorial stone, Main Street runs for five city blocks and terminates in a profusion of rioting elephant's-ear. Running parallel to the highway, and intersecting Main Street at five different points, the avenues ribbon the town, dividing it into shreds, and go their devious ways. There are approximately twenty streets running parallel to Main Street, and past them the streets and avenues cut a maze of jingles and capers, a miniature Kasbah. On the northern side of the town the highway lies like a mighty artery that hums in the night, and on the southern side, which is a tapering snout of land, a cape defended by islands, the sea treads with its wet foot spreading into the spacious horizon and nourishes the little oysters in their liquid beds.

Tupelo is an old town, and the historian's shrines

make a tumultuous bid for those mystical, sentimental, and childishly romantic people who like to tinker with the novelty of a gone era, finding in its eccentricities titillating thoughts. And there are three cemeteries spreading their bone-orchards on display beneath the sun and mossy trees. The telephones ring with dazzling dingling incongruity in a few old wooden dwarfed castles that a century left as its memorials, and the radios hoist their vibrant voices in anachronistic chants. The tiny corny weekly local newspaper publishes its too-abundant proof that the Outside World is woefully out of tune with the wandering March of Tupelo, which goes now backwards, now forwards, now sidewise. The merchants deplore any and all new business ventures, and the Junior Chamber of Commerce luncheons resemble funeral wakes, full of elegiac hocus-pocus. The symptoms of cultural stagnation — a half-century of dwindling commercial assets, geographical isolation from the main bloodstreams of America — have shown on the little town with its startling quirks of character, a queer smug unimaginativeness in vital directions, the exaggerated tendencies of a people grown old.

2

Islands of the Past

Ezra, Who Sought Oblivion

A photograph would have shown Ezra in that *rigor mortis* peculiar to such representations: man in his fifties with a shock of thick silverblack hair, a huge head attached to a thin sallow creased face, quiet small mouth, shallow cleft chin, in his eyes an absenteeism that worked a subtle erosion upon the sensibilities of strangers, affecting them to presume an ascetic strain or world-weariness.

He walked quietly — you would never have noticed him except for his astonishing silence — and he moved the cycle between home and the carpenter's shop with a regularity like the beat of a drum. No man could ever accuse him of philandering, whereas the Catholic priest was rumored consorting nocturnally with the notorious Ruby Peattie, whose house of ill fame was on a sandy road leading off through the savanna. The mayor's son had scandalously deflowered a twelve year old "dago" girl, and so many more prominent examples were made more and more obvious — and natural by the very fact of their existence — examples of outlets to the great sea of human passion and instinct that conventional education

and evolving morals and ratiocination and experience have exiled, but whose subterranean preponderance mutters, like Milton's banished archangel, forever in the human soul.

But — it was a common joke — with a wife like Nora, whose breasts were like globes, now sloping a little like a cradle for her children to sleep on, would a man slow and slight like Ezra ever wish to lie elsewhere?

To his own children he was more like an older brother. Before the matriarch he also trembled in awe. And when she rocked him in the cradle of her deeps, he became strong and male with her strength, which faded rather quickly from him in the strong ascetic light of day, but left a solace and a reminder.

And so he lived, simply so, intuitively, working with tools that were now of his intuition, and accounting for pennies along with the rest of the coin. He had begot nine children through Nora's instigation, six of whom had died in infancy. The other three performed the part of the rest of Nora's brood and regarded the large loud fleshy fretful noble and tender woman with love stimulated by hatred and terror. And thus it was with Ezra. Her curses, uttered in vibrant contralto, were like remarks made direct to God, honest and powerful and always deeply moving. "My Gawd, Ezra," she would say, "my Gawd."

Aside from the sexual maternal excitements in darkness and the bedchamber, most of his pleasures were tranquil. He liked sunshine. He never smoked or drank. He could not distinguish between subtle

layers of tones. He liked that old joke Moses made at Mt. Sinai when asked if he performed on a musical instrument. "I play the reddio," replied Moses translated into the more modern idiom. Ezra liked the glow he felt as he enunciated it, as it rose from the dusty pallet of extreme old age. He liked to breathe the musty cloud, the feeling of kinship to the world, that the beautiful tattered old response gave him (who was in many ways an antiquarian), a similarity to great tough fellows: prizefighters, stokers, admirals, business tycoons, and Missouri farmers.

Together with the Old Man, Nora's father, he worked in the carpenter's shop, eking out enough, though never quite plenty, when it was regarded as an American wage.

In fact, Ezra was poor, but he was blessed with ignorance and never knew that he was really poor. He had never been adventurous enough to travel, and he was not curious about things he did not know. His curiosity about his neighbors was a sporadic revival that always left him feeling a little fretted, envious, and baffled, as if he were cut off from them by some great tissue, transparent and indivisible.

Sometimes he felt a great longing for some unknown power he had not. Then he said he felt blue, and the children felt an indefinable *malaise* from seeing him sit sightlessly in a chair, his great thin spatular hams of hands clasped grotesquely between his nervous long thin legs. Then Nora would take him off to bed early and suck his flesh to her flesh until he felt blissfully oblivious.

Nora herself, while short and thick, was never well. Ezra, who was the spawn of fleshly bigboned people, created an impression of physical frailty and tenuousness, whereas Nora, whose parents had been small and hardy and electric by nature, was only bloated with tallow or some substance kin, and her balloon breasts had been noted for the weak and watery nature of their abundant milk.

Her energy was supposedly as huge as herself, but it was difficult to ascertain how much her famous reservoir of power was a result of careful condensation and conservation. She did not make many superfluous steps. Her house was dusty and unkempt. She kept her vigor as a stimulus, to charge others with vigor. She was a mother, not a hummingbird.

Sometimes she had to get her tiny son to stroke her back to relax the tight grip of pain while she joked, scorning pity. And at such times she seemed contemptuous of tenderness.

The Malady

December, 1932. So on this night when Nora chose to leave him (Ezra never thought of it any other way except that Nora had chosen, for she had always bent saplings and weaklings to her will, and surely death had no defense against Nora) Ezra had felt so neuter, so dead, that he had not recognized in the blur before him his father-in-law come in commiseration and loyalty to the human tie.

For awhile Ezra's nerves sang with terrible dizzying verve a song whose savage protest against the

psychological abortion was tinged with exquisite agony similar to the physical agony a human body knows when it is forced to carry a burden straining downward propulsively, compulsively, with the natural pull of gravity, while in the meantime the mind is confronted with an ever-increasing distance over which to carry its unendurable load.

O utter futility. No philosophy could answer. God turned His gaze. Nora was forever gone. The sore was already putrid. The wound was greater than anyone knew, he thought.

(Had anyone ever succeeded in putting the chick back into the egg, or Humpty Dumpty together again? The finality was what he could not understand. Like the concept of eternity, the concept of finality passes all human understanding. Or is it the concept of mortality that confounds us?)

The Old Man stood beside his bummy son-in-law, his brother from Adam; the Old Man stood upright in this incredible forceful universe, to which human beings contribute the incredible factors and the incredulity, this ferociously maladjusted and incorrigible human world. The Old Man had conquered his selfish fears long before with humility, and his sorrow was more for others' pain.

The Old Man said, in a voice soft and husky and melting with plaintive sorrow, perhaps a little like a little whine, "Wouldn't you like to speak to the children, son? They are here. Wouldn't you like to help them try to understand what's happened? See, here's little Hilliard."

But Ezra's outward-dealing perception was

bunged. Ezra could not understand how the Old Man could be so supple in the wake of death. Ezra found himself incapable of realizing his own children. He turned his head sidewise with great effort. It was like closing a heavy iron door. "I cain't," he murmured dully. He heard the tiny liquid sound of little Hilliard's quiet weeping, the "snk!" as the child snuffed mucous back into the little passages of his nose, but it was irrelevant sound, and Ezra went whirling on in his own torment.

Gradually, as he awakened infinitesimal degree by degree from the syrupy stupor of his confusion, he began to see in consternation and, like the commentator in a dream, with a dreamlike poignancy that he was supposedly the father of his children, not their brother after all.

He began to sense that he was playing, and had been playing, the wrong part, and now that he saw himself the master of this strange new household he would have liked to be blotted out of his very existence. How he wished he had sired no children.

Then it was, in a vague unaccountable way, that he resented the dead Nora as if she were alive. She had done a Judas thing, who had been his primitive spirit's guide. She had been a traitor all along, waiting for this opportunity to crown him king of fools.

Now that Nora was gone he had become an idiot and a pawn. She had breathed light into him, and she had taken it away. Any illusion he had cherished as to his virility and self-importance vanished, leaving him in ill-defined panic. He should have sired no children, he did not want children. He wished he

could will them out of existence with a fairy-godmotherish sort of willing. Surely they could not live if Nora was dead.

His old pride in these rudiments of humanity he had helped make, the kind that had so often ruptured from her as debacles, had never been anything but a superimposed pride, a convention he sometimes, in his feeble way, advocated, and more often tolerated.

The grotesquerie of this skeleton-key diagnosis, so impersonal and synthetic, does Ezra injustice. Ezra, like the fabulous John Henry, was "a nachul man." He was not good, and he was not bad, but he was not the psychological monster this account implies. So much of life is inarticulate. He was like other men who, when lent to an imaginative mind, may become deeply significant and compelling. He was just an ordinary man, and there are some imaginative minds to whom he might even have appeared deeply insignificant.

Yes, Ezra lived the measured pace of days and nights, his unwieldly life sometimes being trundled slowly, sometimes galloping madly, more often commencing at a donkey trot. He did not live a jumbled tense life or a minutely exquisite one. He just lived. And as with other practical philosophers, most of whom never read books, any excessive imaginative quality in his fellowman at once aroused his suspicions, for he was fully conscious of a certain social "union" to which he always owed his dues, and he had learned to recognize imaginative men by their peculiarities: he considered most peculiarities

either hostile and offensive or slightly insane, a few "funny."

So that when he reasoned stupidly to himself that Nora had betrayed him — for Nora had been like the hen and the sun, and her planetary brood could not be if Nora did not herself exist — he kept these nonunion thoughts blurred in his own mind, for he knew they were unsocial and had been condemned in the tight hold of the union. He knew it as a coward knows, not in the full strength of vision, but with the vague fear of blunders.

He sensed too that the union would tolerate such depraved lapses in times of crisis, trusting that they would pass, or rather, be left behind. Eventually the solutions of time would heal the psyche. There is an outlet to every maze.

Meanwhile here was the immediacy, and he, like a drowning man, was clutching at straws. You might refer to this moment as the time when Ezra was the only man in the universe, for everyone knows that a drowning man finds himself the only creature the voracious sea is seeking, the only man who ever dies.

The mind must turn its clumsy wheel. "I must go down to the shop," thought Ezra automatically as he saw the morning light sparkling on the frosty pane. While he went on with his stunning thoughts, the insistent content of his mind, he drew his coat-sleeve wrongside out over his arm.

The sun was bright, the wind brittle: its sharp shards clove against his head with sustained sibilance, crisp and shrill. As he crossed beneath the white overhanging trunks of the sycamores the re-

ports of curling bark and frosty sticks underneath his feet sounded distant and unreal.

The narrow backstreets were raw with oyster-shells strewn the day before by the city maintenance crew. As did their pappies before them. If God had intended men to fly he would have given them wings similar to the chickens'. Instead he gave them their funny feet.

Ezra walked mechanically forward, sealed tight against external impressions, quite thoroughly ignorant of the fact that the underside of his old overcoat showed several ragged seams through the rents in the raveling rayon lining. Like an idiot playing with a bright colored toy. His hands ached with cold. His body shrank from the icy probes of winter breezes.

He came upon the carpenter's shop. The square block of brick building with the small mountain of shavings to the side. With the chocks of his frozen hands he quietly turned the knob of the door. The escaping warm air engulfed him as the door swung wide beyond his hands. He stood there in a daze, on the eve of utter confusion, as the dawning idea took hold that he had almost unconsciously — had subconsciously — brought himself to this place where he had no business to be at a time like this.

The human statue Nora had left in the human world was being pumped free of its peculiar resident fluids, washed, embalmed, three city blocks away by the harrassed little and gentlemanly undertaker and his quiet methodical respected negro assistant in the funeral "home."

Ezra felt an overwhelming shame and horror, and wondered what in the name of God he should say or could say. In his daze he gradually discerned the shocked looks on the men's faces at seeing him there like a phantom in the doorway, darkened by contrast with the bright morning light that blazed fleetingly in past him in short and long streamers. The looks of restrained curiosity, and here and there flexed in the mobile muscles of their cheeks a petering attempt at sympathy, and even a brazen grin where a ribald sense of humor bubbled merrily out of sensitivity like stone.

The flesh of his thin face hung heavy and painful and burning. He felt unspeakably weird and feverish. He had never before felt so bungling and out of place, and yet he felt powerless to appear in other guise. So he continued to stand there hypnotized by his own strange actions.

He saw the men begin a muttering among themselves, but it was only a sight that registered slightly on his consciousness. The wizened face of the Old Man's right hand man, Dingy Nelson, appeared in the background, apart, watching with stoical curiosity.

These men of the social union perhaps knew that Ezra, like a drowning man, was being the only man in the universe. He was almost deliciously aware of his moment of exemption from union laws. He had several wild impulses, momentous, yet so quick as to seem nearly simultaneous: to rush out into the streets and run hellbent for nowhere, to throw himself upon the shavings and plead and beat his breast before the

terrible and anonymous Destroyer, to confide in each of these men as if each were his mentor and his Mother, and to lie away like a schoolboy the mystery of his presence here.

With all these impulses tugging away at him so urgently and persistently, Ezra stood in his tracks, as tongue-tied and threatening as a totem pole, his hands, so cold and bloodless, plucking at the nap in his pockets, the spindle of his comprehension radiating tendrils so tenuous that he could only feel them slightly plucking, vapors.

He had tried to will her to remain alive. And failed.

She was his mother, his father, his wife, his prompter, his provider, his conscience, and his deadliest enemy.

His loss had completely shaken his equilibrium.

Dazzling unbelievably vicious scene in which he lost his rock of ages. Magnificent truant hussy, whose last gasp was entrance into the valley of shadow, where he could never, as himself, trespass. The inert flesh lost its lifeluster before his astonished vainly clutching eyes. The warm poured into the cold stillness. He did not believe an iota of it.

Fiercely he shook Daniel's friendly great hand off his shoulder.

The Vanishing Herd

Because the roaming bison herds, whose hooves once beat the North American plains with muffled explosions, are said to be threatened with extinction, there is no real reason for alarm. The beautiful lit-

tle etchings of the cavedwellers will preserve for another sheaf of centuries the essence of the buffalo personality as he was at his prime and the pinnacle of his fame. But there have been persistent rumors since the announcement of his threatened demise that, conversely, he is being brought back towards lasting survival by demand and careful breeding. This may be true if there is a special use for him, if his meat becomes an edible fashion, or if his domain be prolonged for an especial sport, like buffalo-racing or another vice of luxury such as the substitution of the buffalo for the lapdog. So we see Samson with his hair cut, his power weakening into trivialities, superficialities, and perhaps pink ribbons in his tail.

And so the Old Man and his Old Woman saw week by week, year after year, their generation becoming extinct, that world in which they had reached their prime and the pinnacle of their fame. For America does not make a convention of saving fame and honor for the old men, but rather has that cynical practical eye for the metamorphoses of men from the adult stage back a way toward the larval grub, and tolerates senility somewhat impatiently.

(You might, if you are a government official, still young and in the least vigorous, in a foreign totalitarian government, which is religion and state and family and all things — you might be persuaded to gas the old people, for they are bound to obscure the new vision of supernal destiny, to slow the increase of national efficiency. Beside being a drag on the hem of progress, a national inertia, they have lost life. "Tchtch, Hans, isn't it sad to see them, halfmen and

halfwomen, or neuter gender only, alive to a small degree? It is mercy to kill them, so cleanly, so neatly. They can thank their stars they did not fall prey to a loathsome disease." O, you are right, because you are young.)

The Old Man was an ugly little man, with the enlarged enseamed features of old age, the grizzly hoary beard to be mown by his razor, the soft single white hair standing like a ghost atop his pink skull, diminished blue eyes under bushy white brows, and a pert little chin set out on a jutting jaw.

He was of a piquant ugliness, not at all repulsive except in the summertime, when he *would* sit out on the front porch in his undershirt and bare feet and display to the world's incurious gaze a chest carved out of caving flesh, his red skin flowing loose in folds upon the base of his neck, his toenails yellow and bent.

You couldn't make a fool of him twice. His blue eyes were quick as cat-movement, and he might condescend to favor you with a handful of his sundry opinions if you showed that you were up to those levels, and then again he probably would think better of it. But when you were least expecting it he would suddenly display a perspicacity sharp as a tack.

Plenty of spunk, with such youthful maneuvers that his ugliness was in general far more lovable than those even, firm, fine, round features, baby aquiline noses, and heroic heads of narcissistic youth, emotionally immature and intellectually retarded. The Old Man had lived so many emotions through so many experiences that he possessed seasoning and

maturity. That now he was grouchy a good part of his time and morose sometimes is as understandable as the delusions of grandeur that haunt the delirious egotistical young.

Also that he must have a good many eccentricities and downright misconceptions and mean impulses and unjust prejudices was a fact that could have been prophesied when he had lain in swaddling clothes at his own peculiar birth. There were men he hated, and his hatreds were as hard in him as the knots in pine.

(But his hatreds for other men were always eclipsed sooner or later by his inward hatred of hatred. Something in him always despised animosities as infantile manifestations of helplessness. Anger, no matter how fierce and scorching, was an appalling weakness, it seemed to the Old Man. He had a puckish humor reserved for crises, and sanity, which he called levelheadedness.)

His Old Woman was more soft and faded, possessed of quilted skin, a scrawny frame given to pouching, a dry wiry thread of a voice, and memories of pain, joy, sorrow, beauty, and horror. Sometimes she seemed punchdrunk from excessive bouts with life, but that assumption is just a poetic way of saying that her energy was at an ebb, that she was physically weary. Sometimes she seemed depleted, dilapidated, degenerated. And then sometimes she shone like sterling silver, with a dignity, a sense of equity and well-being almost too judicious. She was not dead yet. Not by a long shot, she warn't.

The Old Man held lonely conversations with the Old Woman in their dingy cottage as they supped at

their austere little round table. Some impediment sang in the chimney with a shrill squeee and tremolo, a birdlike warble. The vast surf of wind pouring through the miles of atmosphere let a tiny divertissement of its power take place in the clumps and clusters of trees round about the Old Man's little boxlike establishment. Usually this was a fine music, almost superfine, but at times the howling raving hurricanes came. Then groans filled the little theater, but they were just wind.

Out through the cracked pane in the window, over the cardboard where the pane had broken out, and through all the other dingy glass, some of it translucent rather than transparent, they looked into their sandy backyard, where, as the Old Woman had tartly remarked, you couldn't raise anything but a fuss.

Neither of them knew it, but not so long ago all that land, that marshy lowland, had lain beneath the sea, as had so much of Florida. Their lives had been no longer than the fingers on a child's hand. But "to heck with that," as the Old Man might have said. For it was all theirs, it was dear, as was the gloom of the silent little house where lurked so many phantoms and echoes.

Between the jaundiced walls sat old rockers, faded rugs, old seashells, photographs (some tintypes), oldtimey bric-a-brac discolored by a thick film of dust. All very cozy and comforting to those who knew it. This treasurehouse. A thief would never sniff at it. As a matter of fact, the Old Man and his Old Woman were partly blinded to their own immediate surroundings, pursuing soul matters through those

rooms, which were as habitual as their skins, and tolerating the ordinary and familiar, no matter how ancient and oldfashioned.

Said the Old Man one evening, "Well, Old Woman, we must be getting old, because yesterday when we saw that funeral pass you didn't make a peep, and this morning when I heard the churchbells ring, I didn't wonder whose wedding it was, didn't even care. Human passions just don't seem to matter any more, do they?" His ruminative intonation recessed, and while he blew his nose and cleared his throat and picked the dry flakes of mucous out of his big beak, he could hear her drone cautiously, "Well, Papa, I guess there's not much use dwelling on those things too much."

Then an old cunning and humor lighted and glowed in his little blue eyes as he tripped the Old Woman up in old style. "Now that just follows the point I was making," he said, purring judiciously, sarcastically sweet. "When you don't get the flavor of life anymore, you'd be better off in the speerit world" (he caressed each word, he had an immense love of acting and mimicry) "where people ain't of the flesh. You wuz put here as a human being, with physical appetites and lusts and things. Now when you get to where them things don't annoy you, why you ain't human anymore. Now is you?"

That was the proposition, but jousting of wits was not among the Old Woman's skills, and the Old Man's particular form of wit was, and had always been, lost upon her. In his youth when he had played practical jokes she had scolded him, even in public,

which emphasized the fact truly. When he teased her she sometimes snapped at him with a real ferocity.

(And, because she could not always understand what he was talking about, she was usually deeply jealous of any woman who could. She would become very remote and still, like the air in the middle of the hurricane.)

Now, because the Old Woman was not subject to the spar of juvenile vigor that at moments erected itself in the melancholy little Old Man, she merely agreed with him in a soft murmur, but the argument made no lasting impression. It was a floating sound on a swift current. She humored him by agreeing with anything he said, and he played a rather depraved game with her by contradicting himself often to see if she would realize the contradiction.

She never did. She was accustomed to agreeing with him in most worldly matters — he had always been so much more a livewire than she.

The Old Man, at sixty-five, had almost retired except for a little plumbing or carpentry for "chicken feed" which old friends requested of him and new clients must beg him to do. He visited the shop now and then out of "purentee" lonesomeness.

There had been no one like him to do good work. He hummed snatches of this old song or that old song while he worked with slow and absolute rhythm. There was a divine logic about what he did. He saw carpenters' tricks when he looked at a pile of lumber speculatively. He could draw plans. Then, with an instinct born of trial and error, he could realize his plans. Whether he directed the construction of a

sewer or worked with clean redolent wood among the whirring machinery or straddled a ridgepole to patch a roof, he worked with singular honesty and efficiency and imagination. He had studied his tools and his materials until he had formed an instinct for their use. And — here was where he broke the halter of artisanship — he knew and he could hypnotize men with his voice and his visions, the subtle powers of his personality. He could inspire their faith. He had trained a negro, treating him with infinite patience and good humor and hardheadedness, until that negro was a very fine craftsman. He had worked men and done small miracles. He liked to be paid, not on the time principle, which he considered a fraud, but for units of work. He often finished projects so far ahead of schedule that, had he been anyone else, the employee would have been dubious of the work. It is fairly safe to say that if he had wanted to make a career of it he might have made a clever politician or even a famous minister of the Gospel perhaps, but he was too independent to fool with such shenanigans except to toy with political ideas and argue his own with the men. He worked beside the members of his crew. He had been to grammar school two years approximately sixty years before.

Now that most of his industry towered in the past, and as he slouched on his backstoop much of his time and gave over to daydreams, he mentally whimpered to think about it, and he looked with sightless imploring eyes up at the deep blue sky, and he chewed his thumbnail as he had not since he was a tiny boy.

He did not know exactly what to do with himself. He vaguely craved responsibility.

For a lifetime he had experienced the subtle insinuations of the weather, and now it was more brilliantly expressive than ever, now that he had more time for observation.

When the sun lathered the immense old sink of the sky, and the mornings developed their fine luster, and shavings of light came through the trees, while the palms shone waxenly, varnished, and the poinsettia leaves caught pools of liquidlike sunlight, the brilliance usually only made the Old Man lazy. The splendid sun makes men conscious of their bodies. It has a Venuslike significance, and azure heavens hint of lotusflowers.

Then, when the evenings were somber and sullen, and the trees dragged crumpled crisping leaves with hisses, trolled them, discarded them, and when the wind came with a wild drunken riotousness, or a sinister damp furry wind brought the ghostly fog upon the close rooms of the low trees, the earth becoming damp and quilted with cloying leaves, then the physical world became as comfortable and hospitable as a giant sewer. It was usually in humid weather that the Old Man was susceptible to the blues, to melancholy and pessimism about all things, to fatigue.

The next morning was probably bright with searing cold, frosty and snowy dry sterile air, antiseptic aridity, aching bones, bursting waterpipes, and earth frozen like rock.

But now, of late, all the grand theater of meteorology found him in the same positions of mournful

relaxation, philosophic weariness, and open mutinous despondency. Everyday he felt another sharp stab between his shoulder blades, and he called it neuralgia, but he somehow knew it was his spirit that ached and sent its twinges like cries for help into the various members of his body. He now seemed to be dying at a rapid rate. Everyday found him more shriveled and feeble. And when he closed his eyes and moved toward slumbrous massiveness, he found that his spirit wanted to leave the huge trunk of his body and the chaotic world and wander like a sprite into eternity.

(If you had seen him sitting there on the steps, his eggbald head concealed beneath an old squashed hat, his old gnarled roots of hands cupped over the skulls of his knees, and his face smashed with longing for some phantom existence, you would only have passed him and gone elsewhere to find livelier and more pungent company, thinking to avoid that senseless conflict which must always exist between the different stages or levels of life.)

New Hope

From 1932 let us take a backward view of the twenties, which were presumably roaring. The twenties were full of origins, as the thirties would be of reverberations.

We won't itemize fads and follies, but we will give you a slender account of some "inventions that have enriched human life." (1) Airship. (2) Aeroplane. (3) Automobile. (4) Ocean steamship. (5) Sky-

scraper. (6) Railroad steam train. (7) Block signal. (8) Trolley car. (9) Talking machine. (10) Typewriter. (11) Electric light. (12) Telegraph. (13) Telephone. (14) Radio. (15) Elevator. (16) Sewing machine. (17) Compass. (18) Dynamo. (19) Thermometer. (20) Clock. (21) Microscope. (22) Cotton gin. (23) Barometer. (24) Cash register. (25) Motion pictures. (26) Power loom. (27) X-ray tube. (28) Washing machine. (29) Camera. (30) Slide-rule. (31) Printing press. (32) Binoculars. (33) Vacuum cleaner. (34) Harvester.

These are only a few of the world-shaking events that were present in the twenties, but if you would enjoy quaint reading, look into some encyclopædia published in that decade. One revolution was so profound they scarcely could put it in writing: the moral. Quite a few prosperous people discovered that God was inhuman and that science explained away a number of sins.

In a sense, life in the United States of America was more weird than an insane asylum, the eccentricities more profane than formerly. The elegance was criminal, the plush and whiskey fat, the insane inanities atrocious. Serious men sometimes longed in their innermost beings for the sanctity of padded cells. The advances of technology cost a fabulous sum in human nervepower. Wealth lent its fever to the cities. Words mushroomed in advertisements. Wealth of noise, narcotics, neurotic lusts and desires, wealth crowned the madcap world of Americans (while somewhere Americans starved. Subterranean Americans?).

Once the Old Man, his eyebrows still iron-gray and a blackish tint to his thinning halo of hair, while reading a series of Prohibition jokes in the newspaper, felt an excruciating bitterness saturate his thought and a *malaise* subtly take his physical buoyancy, supplant it. It put him in a vile mood, that is.

He laid aside his newspaper and held twined fingers over his abdomen as he sat and reflected, his chin close to his breast. The nastiness of whiskey, the insanity of it, was well known to him. It was a symbol of the weakness in men. It reduced them to the blessed coherence of idiocy.

It should not be denied them in this land of liberty merely because they were weak men and fools.

So the Old Man, infinitestimal against the backdrop of America, picked his paper back up out of his lap and read on wearily, as if through a shroud, and breathed tough prayers that resembled curses, this tough old man. Was his pessimism impertinent?

Men were never born free and equal ultimately and absolutely. And no matter how fluent their speech and labored their campaigns, the great problems they attack are the same throughout the centuries. Logic, science, the arts — all fertile ideas evolve new symbols, new imagery, with which to adorn the world, but the same problems renew themselves, dynamic and indestructible.

The old adjectives are discarded and we learn to express force not in terms of good and evil but in terms like rational and irrational, adjustment and maladjustment, health and sickness — and religion dissolves into hygiene. Our bodies have become in-

separable from our minds, and we have lost the mediæval concept of a soul. Yet everywhere soft men, soft morals, confused minds, show themselves, as if in defiance of the new terminology.

During the twenties, in some quarters of selfconscious humanity, groups resurrected the old God, the archaic God of destiny and all his collection of ancient crutches, and all the milling and blather was a thin disguise for the shrieks of their souls: "O help! help! Save us from ourselves!" Even more often, men and women sought new directions via godlessness, denouncing the hellishness of self-righteousness in the churchly manner. The "intellectuals" doped themselves with phantom ideals such as the mystical tenets of Communism (American style). "Art" specialized in forms of insanity, became so insinuating, so subtle, so hypersuggestive, that one could hardly tell a literary masterpiece from a cookbook. O silly America, young, profane, drunk with tinsel words.

The Old Man remained in a genteel poverty during the Big Business Boombooms, as did many of his fellow workers, and he and a precious few of them were scared stiff of all this puffy wealth and wildcat morality and fashionable thugmugging. He frequently commented aloud to himself that the people badly needed humbling. Now and then this extraordinary statement fetched a cool hard answer from some quiet poor carpenter — a spit and a reply like this, "Yeah, the country's going to the dogs, fast." But this might seem like sour grapes.

Their vision was short and narrow, like that of all people.

In 1923 the Old Man made a pilgrimage to the font of hope. His daughter bore him a granddaughter, his first grandchild. He greeted this birth with an inner ecstasy that mounted toward the religious. That in the midst of this maze of personalities so frictional and fraudulent and nasty-ugly could come to birth anything so pure was an incredible fact, a beatitude.

Perhaps long ago he had felt the same way about his own daughters, but now as this daughter, Nora, lay beside the tiny squirming fruit of her womb, she seemed dark with filth of experience. It was strange to know that this holy animal had come from within her big clumsy body. The Old Man could not get enough of watching the little crabby baby. It wailed, but for a time it could not make itself more hideous. It was redskinned and wrinkled: dark hairs made its cranium look dirty. Overshadowing these facts, it was new and precious, like tidings of great joy.

As it lost its scarlet tinge and wrinkles, so it lost its extreme delicacy. The time came when the Old Man could lift its intricate little mechanism and hold it aloft, so pure, so dainty, and delicate. He felt like evil incarnate as he held it poised in his arms. A tender little entity, radiant with hope. Yes, a dirty old man fingering a little glistening angel — that was the way he felt.

Now the tide of his energies left some over with which he could play. Now he found time to recapture that innocence which was of inexperience if he could catch the shadows, for it was shadowplay. (No,

no, he must read meanings into every phase of being, and must become disgruntled.)

Perhaps one reason he cherished the baby so much was that its elusive spirit was so intriguing. One of many reasons.

For external purposes, for show — society demands show of us — the Old Man made all kinds of pretenses. He made all kinds of entertaining noises. "You lil" — whereupon he began talking in unknown tongues, recalling to mind the tower of Babel, just an echo — "chooga chooga chooga. Woowoo. Puhpuhpuhpuhpuhpuhpuh. Weeeoooo. Hey, hey. Look here. Tingalingalingaling. See. See here. See this lazy old tomcat. Hit him. Hit him with your fist." Here he was holding the baby at a level with the fierce old striped alleycat, which was thrown in sleep up on top of the deadcold stove. The Old Woman came and shooed them away. "You want that child to git scratched?"

When the Old Woman was gone he dropped his silliness again. "Well, she scolded us good and proper," he laughed with brazen friendliness to the impersonal gaze of the baby. Then, his expression soft and tremulous with cautious joy, the Old Man must croon and murmur confidences to the baby. He imbued all objects with new elfin qualities.

The baby seemed tickled to death by most of it, convulsive with joy, a wigglesome audience. "It seems to appreciate attention," the Old Man commented to the Old Woman, trying to refrain from purring.

They let him dress it in its little nightgown. It

squirmed agreeably throughout the process, emerged looking so incongruously gay, jaunty, its soft round little cheeks glowing with transparent holiness, that the Old Man was ready to swoon with adoration.

Soon, not twelve months later, there was another baby, and in 1927 there was another. There had been others before, and there was one between this last and the one of 1924, but these were the physical errors already mentioned. (They ripened stilly along their guts up to a time, and then remained forever embryo. Symbolic of all that in human lives which develops up to a time and then remains forever embryo. Like flourishes committed by a hand unattached to a body.)

Each of the three living babies emerged like a little Christchild, a Messiah. (To ripen stilly as a Christchild up to a certain time and then to remain forever embryo?) At the time of diapers and bustle it was enough to make one wonder if there were not too many little Jesuses.

The Old Man of 1932

We have returned from our quick trip into the twenties, the slipstream of the thirties, to find the Old Man sixty-five years old and death closing in. Life was no longer a gamble, it seemed, but with dead certainty would end in death.

(When the Old Man had been fourteen years old he had felt that he was immortal.)

About this town, Tupelo: Tupelo was not as full of ancients as St. Petersburg, because Tupelo was

small. But Tupelo was not merely a middle-aged town. At times it seemed like a prison for young bounding bloods and budding bouncy girls, an Alcatraz of youth. The numerical superiority of the ancients made it cramped. Slowly the population was declining, for ancients, like jalopies, have a way of dying from more or less natural causes: worn parts, exhaustion, going to pieces, refusing to run as an integrated whole.

Consider the neighborhood of the Old Man, a fairly typical neighborhood, though, scientifically speaking, too many variable factors were involved to set it up as a norm of anything whatsoever.

There were three houses on his block. In one old shingled barn there was Jennie Smith, eighty-eight, dying of cancer, and her surly seventy-year-old son, and his forty-two-year-old boy, "Burly" Smith. They all lived there together in their own peculiar fashion. The Old Man rarely saw them to speak to. Across the alley the Old Man had set up his domicile. In the remaining house, a little clapboard cottage on the corner, lived an aging prostitute. Her name was Sadie Gay, but once when the Old Man had waxed gabby he had called her the "gay lady," a slip of the tongue that pleased him — he took a poetic interest in slips of the tongue, the novel symbology — and now she was the "gay lady," so far as he was concerned, for better or worse.

Once when the Old Woman had brought home some orange wine — reluctantly, but she had not wanted to hurt Old Lady Black's feelings by refusing it — the Old Man had bravely volunteered to have

a few drops so that the Old Woman could tell Old Lady Black how good her brew was. He was a little while later heard to say, a good deal too loud and emphatically, it may be, that he wished he could put "his kicker up" so that whenever the "gay lady" passed over his lawn he could "give the string a twirl" and kick her "in the slats." You see what drink will do to a good man.

Across the street, facing the Old Man's domicile, lived two old geezers, Bo Brown and Jim Black and their wives and families-in-general, including a sprinkling of cousins and mothers-in-law, in two little cottages set side by side and made by the same general pattern of dowdy keep-the-cost-low. Good men, good women, good friends, and endearingly coarse. They made their socio-chemical contributions toward maintaining a cockeyed world. They all grew up together out of the glands of the earth; they might have been German or Italian or English or French, but they were not, and this street was their street, and the little idiot boy who introduced himself with dignity to all passersby, and the little yellow dog Spike all lent themselves to the Old Man's view.

But his neighbors were superfluous, so far as the Old Man was concerned. He was choosy. He despised snobbery and was never quite aware that he was guilty of a little snobbery of his own. It was natural. Each to his kind. A law the world must eventually break to a noticeable extent. The Old Man had many speaking acquaintances, plenty of friends even, but out of all the people he had met in a lifetime he had selected only a few really good friends, perhaps

twenty or less, and they had moved away from his spheres, or died out of them, or they lived in a remote sector of the town and lived their separate lives now, so that it was no wonder that sometimes the Old Man felt as if he lived in the door of his tomb. Life was always so uncontrollable, and patterns were disrupted.

Sometimes he and his Old Woman escaped their premature sepulchre by walking across the town to visit their daughter, Nora, who lived on the verge of the negro section. "Across the tracks," as Americans say.

(Their first daughter, Ruth, had died of pneumonia long before. Sulfa drugs being outside their realm of consciousness at that time, they had no power to save her.)

This visit was a treat they kept for themselves. For though the children might treat them with impudence and the contempt of the warrior young, still sometimes they reacted with overwhelming devotion, and especially with spontaneous admiration for the wit and industry of the Old Man, and they were always blooming and vigorous with contagious enchantment, save when tired and squally or in little spells of sickness, when they became languid and doubly dear.

The old ones did not love the children for the vaudeville entertainment the children supplied, amusing a spectacle as they often were, but for a far more mystical reason. In the social equations, children equal hope.

With his grandchildren the Old Man might, if the

spirit seized him, shed his age like Cock Robin moulting. Especially in the oldest child, a girl, did he find sweet pie to his taste. Going home at night, under the wee smiling summer stars that, mysteriously blooming, imbued the ways with a tender light, he would burst into voluble enthusiasm. "That's the cutest little trick I ever seed."

You may wonder what it was in little Ethel at the demonic age of nine that charmed an old man, especially an old rhinoceros like the Old Man. Well, it was a kind of elfin ugliness, an ingrained grimace that sometimes erupted into one of the purest and sweetest of smiles, a look of old terrible knowing in her little bright brown shoebutton eyes, a willingness to talk at machine-gun rate at the slightest provocation, and a terrible cynical contempt for the weak little birdbellied entity who was her brother Mutt (Fred) and only one year younger than she. The Old Man was responding to one of his kind.

It was the baby boy who caught the Old Woman's fancy. Little Hilliard, who had also become Ethel's idol (she scorned dolls) for some occult reason. Perhaps it was because of Ethel's precocious assumption of responsibility for her world and social convention that she saw something especially fine in the adult response to the roly-poly little miracle of stupidity and tantrums and misplaced emotion.

Anyway, through her own invention, Ethel soon was one of the biggest and best audiences the bonny little boy had, and she went so far as to pretend sponsorship. "You wanna see mah baybe?" she would

invite with warmth and anxious insistence, and prattling she would lead the way to the side of the little iron-frame bed. As the baby grew into a little manchild, she watched over it and confided in it and was helpfulness incarnate.

The Rescue of the Perishing Children

Fretful, caught in the densities of emotion, frightened, desultory, and with a mournful pique, the children reconnoitered with their daddy and their granny and the others at the bedbrim, inadvertently ringing the enameled chamberpot; its white enamel was already bruised with black whorls where the enamel had been chipped. With missteps into the dim drapery of the closet, tiptoeing with fantastic delicacy in their ugly squat black scuffed little oxfords, they wandered through the rooms in the silvery shivery gloom.

The electric light seemed dimmed as the light of day reinforced itself. Shadows moved along the walls in sinister importance and impotence. And Nora ebbed out of their worlds, leaving them terrified and forlorn. Ethel 9 years old, Mutt (Fred) 8, Hilliard 5.

Then began those vast months of loneliness, in which a "nigger" girl rattled around in the void Nora had left, cooking up inedible pots of beans and regarding the children with a dark, enigmatic, and ogrelike countenance provocative of infantile hysteria.

Little Hilliard howled continuously and convul-

sively, as if he wanted to tear down his little contents from the world on which he hung and go in search of Nora down through the valley of shadow. Ezra came home only late, if at all. He seemed to ignore them deliberately, if ever he could be accused of deliberation.

Ethel became more and more defiant of the Destroyer as it hovered over their home. She hugged little Hilliard to her flat little breast and soothed him and crooned him to sleep. She scolded and dominated Mutt, thereby keeping him from realizing anguish as she knew it. She developed an exterior as hard as suet, which perhaps cost her early the moist sentimental love of her grandmother, but which melted for little Hilliard, over whose soft little head she might sob quietly as she rocked him in her bony little lap. She was a nine-year-old girl at the time, but in reality she was much older.

The only beauty in their warped and unstable little lives, with their enormous need for beauty and fullness, was the daily visit from their granddaddy and grandmother, who came together or singly some time each day. Then, for a brief spell, the children realized their human importance once more, and they reveled in glorious dimensions of power and affection and darted about in transports of joy. But the visits each came punctually to a close at nightfall or noon or whenever it was, and the old pinching loneliness and emptiness returned.

Soon, through the increased anxiety and stifled inquiry of the grandparents and other subtle reverberations, they began to sense a danger that rose rapidly

into a sharp pitch of reality when one night Ezra brought Ruby home with him.

As long as Ezra had kept Ruby away from the house and the children, the Old Man had said nothing, speaking only in grunts and carefully avoiding contact with Ezra down at the shop except for the necessary transactions, but feeling an inner fury and sorrow that threatened to explode him someday into angry speech and gusty action. When he handed Ezra the green leathery paper bills, he felt a sizzling resentment, and he wanted to blurt out an interrogation: "How much of this money goes to the children, you piece of a man?"

But the morning he rode his bicycle over to the house and found Ruby very much present in the kitchen, he knew he could digest no more. "What are you doing here?" he demanded explosively. "I live here," she flung back, and she stood in the doorway, tall and fleshly, with a malevolent black look in her eye. The wind whipped her dressing gown back from her sleek naked legs, and the deep slit between her full breasts was on display on her bosom. The Old Man gritted his teeth and flung the screendoor back. She towered above him belligerently. She was tall like a tower.

(A fury swelled up in him until he almost burst. Restraint made him sick. He was close to murder. Only the carefully wrought discipline of years of moral endeavor kept his hands clean. That this bulbous body of jouncing buttocks and soft belly and soft teats, that this bovine cartoon of womanhood should be so powerful in a world of serious moral meanings

was suddenly a poignant and powerful truth too strong for his stomach. He wanted to vomit. He shook with disgust. The meaning of strife was brought home to him. He knew that somehow he must win.)

"You keep out of my house," she yelled, and he rushed her, like a football player, his head low. She retreated.

The children were in the front part of the house. What had passed the night before and already that morning was beyond their comprehension. Children are easily terrified. They are also terrorists. Ruby, who had not anticipated such a marblelike response as they had given her — she had considered herself such a "grand" personality — had been trying with rapacious vigor to erupt a warm response from them. She imagined that they were prejudiced against her by someone's slandering propaganda, and she wanted to know: "Hooz the damn bitch what's been touting you 'bout me?"

It was Ethel who, unwittingly, had developed the resistance movement, deadpanning, assuming an enormous stupidity. Little Hilliard wept without ceasing, until Ruby was driven in desperation to taunt him cruelly. "We gonna give you to the niggers. God, I never seen such a crybaby! If you don't shet up, the boogie man is agoing to come get you, and you know what the boogie man does to little fat boys?"

Ruby did not intend cruelty. She was a little weary and "screwed up," and she was coping with the situation as well as she could. She was going to continue

that the boogie man ate little boys, but she saw Hilliard turn deathly pale and heard him give a little involuntary moan, so she confined her remarks, contented herself with taunting, gloating fiendishly, "Crybaby! Crybaby! He ain't nothin' but a little ole crybaby."

Hilliard ran to Ethel, hiding the lower part of his tear-streaked face with his hands because it quivered so horribly, and appealed to the mute, still, yet sweetly familiar, little figure. She put her arms around him with a futile final gesture, and he whispered hoarsely into her ear, "But I'm a thweet boy, ain't I, Ethel? Ain't I a thweet boy?"

Mutt (Fred) was more or less lucky. Being phlegmatic and easily dominated, he was taken in by Ruby. He was her tool and her only satisfaction. Ethel was torn between hatred for him and desire to be like him, submissive and subjugated. Also, she felt that his sex made a difference. A woman would never caress her as Ruby caressed Mutt. She was green, not so much with jealousy as with hunger.

Ethel loved men instinctively. She wanted to sit in their laps and be fondled and fathered, to light a tender adoration in their eyes. You would never have known what Ethel thought by looking at her impassive little mask, its eyes momentarily flickering, sometimes coming to life like gimlets, watchful, baleful, and then heavy and full like grapes, and unutterably sad.

Then that morning as they heard their granddaddy calling them through the house, that moment was like a deliverance from evil.

They almost ate him up, were as voracious as greedy little suckling pigs. Hilliard had him around the neck with a death grip, a stranglehold, and Ethel hugged his legs so that he could not move a step, in her eyes a feverish light of adoration and imploring that made him wince whenever he looked down at her, and Mutt was hanging around blubbering with relief now that "Granddaddy" had come. He would never have thought of blubbering by himself. He followed Ethel's lead.

(Here is a key: Mutt was always a member of the majority. He rode the bandwagon.)

Meanwhile Ruby was screaming at the Old Man from the kitchen: "Go on and take the goddamn bastards." She didn't want them. "Ezry don't want 'em. Go on and take 'em and git. Git out uv my house, you — you . . ." Ruby was stumped. She was ransacking her vocabulary for an epithet hot and stinging enough, but she was hornswoggled. So the Old Man took them and gat.

The Island of the Past

They lost their roots when Nora died. They reached out again with tender groping tenuous sprouts; then they lost their roots again.

Forces beyond their comprehension seemed determined to debilitate them forever.

They were cast into a strange world on Nora's death, by the mere subtraction of her presence. They gained a little familiarity with that new world, and a little ease in the manipulations of their own grafted

minds, only to be rudely spewed again into another strange world, a world in the foreign territory of the other side of town.

It seemed as if from then on they were doomed to be cast from one strange world to another like little balls, and never to find the original one again.

Now they went to Granddaddy's house, and were greeted with a big blustering show of heartiness through which the stricken face of crisis showed like the dim moon through scudding armies of retreating cloud. They were fed and made acquainted with the double bed and the cot in the second back room, and they were shown little traps in which to sow their effects, which the Old Man had gone to gather — their little worn garb.

Hilliard wanted his old train-toy, but the Old Man promised to get him another, so his blubbering closed with a quiet sneeze. Mutt and Ethel were pale and peaked with anxiety, but they made no unreasonable requests of the Old Man. They were older; their reactions were more inhibited. Both wanted to bawl, but for Hilliard's sake and their own they kept a rigid control.

Among the new tensions there were some new enchantments too. When they were out in the middle of the street they could see the sea where the street terminated. It was not so many blocks away.

And one of Mutt's first explorations was to shinny up the elephantine Spanish oak in the vacant lot across the alley. "You better come down from there," snapped Ethel tearfully, jealous because she had not chanced it first. "Baloney," said Mutt.

Inside the house the new subtle and stealthy smells wrinkled their little noses and made them feel strange. In the midst of all the oldtimey treasures Ethel and Mutt were timid, but little Hilliard spluttered like a firecracker, shouted his commentaries with unselfconscious vim, and asked a good many questions, but he too felt a little baffled and scared, and he nervously dogged Ethel's footsteps in the vain hope that she might reassure him.

They couldn't get accustomed to the toilet: at home they had roosted in an outhouse and used mail-order catalogues.

All afternoon they stood, a little pilgrim band, in the front yard and looked across the street at the little idiot boy and others who might come and go. The adults all looked properly large and authoritative. The mystery of adults was hinged on their mastery of strange skills and their preoccupation with responsibilities. That adult world seemed painfully obscure to the little kid band. They stood and watched: timidly the shrinking selfconscious Ethel, with a limp sparkle the uncertain Mutt, and with sturdy formidable scrutiny the rebellious little Hilliard, who was growing weary and impatient of all this hollow newness and longed for the sanctity of the old.

They went to bed early that night, and they almost suffocated from 7:30 to 11. There was a curious damp musty odor, mildew, in the sealed room. The Old Man had neglected to raise the sash and the window stood shut invincibly, glued by their own psychology.

There were no curtains, only the naked frame, and then, through the sea-dim panes, they could see the low stars tossed among the vast stormy seadrifts of cloud. The air seethed with quiet mists, pale wraiths.

It was at such a time that little Hilliard found himself thinking about "nippers," men who hurried to and fro in the night. The night was simply full of evil men, big and red and grinning callously. The little cups of his ears caught all sounds of breaking branches and whispering conspirators and footsteps on the boardwalk and a fortune of sounds that he acquired from his imagination, and which he would have given the fortunes of the future to dispel. What profit is a life of terror? His big little eyes stood out on stalks as he tried desperately to watch with sober sanity and easy breathing the window and the doorway at the same time. He saw some weird sights in the shadows: twin-eyes and shadowy movement and stealthy figures and other such things. He grew faint and reeling sickheadedly as he tried to bring order to the shuddering chaos of the nightworld.

About 11 o'clock all three fell sound asleep.

The Ruby

Now why did Ezra turn rotten so quickly after a long period of moral fruition, stable righteousness? We ask you.

Concerning Tupelo's wildfire gossip — people need scandal, imaginative recapitulation of "sin," for their own moral edification, just as they need pictures of good for their own emulation. (Thus, you

might say, a curious child should be shown the pornographic: it would increase his knowledge of the platonic. And what we all need is experience, first hand and from all quarters.) If we were not such busybodies we would perish. Curiosity is never at fault. The trouble with gossips is that they are too incurious, too easily content to polish little spite apples when the great fruit of the planet hangs on the solar tree for each of them to devour.

The mind is a theater. We picture ourselves as the heroes, or at any rate, the main and pivot characters. The theater of gossip is as natural a consequence of living as dying, but there is high and low theater, theater with high moral goals, and burlesque, and the follies.

(It is difficult to see how impersonal are the great forces that move us, so imponderable are they, so behind the scenes. And time and again the suspicion wounds us that we are puerile people, fetal minds, illegible tapestries.)

The scribe of these transcripts wanted to keep Ruby a villainess. As a matter of fact we admit reluctantly that Ruby was not at all heartless or bad-intentioned. She was a Victim of Circumstances. Of all equivocations there is not one more warranted than this one. Under other circumstances her tarnished spirit might have developed into a crock of gold. Who knows? Ruby might have been another Florence Nightingale.

If we were called upon to substantiate our argument we might pry into the locked past and bring the following facts to light, indiscriminately grouped

as they are. The list is incomplete. You can make your own thorough study, however. The general public will be able to enlighten you. Ruby's people were a little on the famous side.

Ruby's mother had been a terrible little woman, a little witchy moron, her head shaped like a parrot's, with a nose curving down like a parrot's beak, bobbed gray hair, a fierce viperish tongue on occasion, and a tendency to caress and swoon upon anything male and unsuspecting, especially young boys just turning male. Besides being a windbag who liked to swagger up and down Main Street in an absurd tipsy fashion, monopolizing anybody's time who could be prevailed upon, seizing people's attentions forcibly, she was susceptible to whiskey in any of its forms, and would stoop to drinking vanilla.

Ruby and her brother L. G. were born of woman, primitive woman, but no one could name the man whose sperm fertilized their original ova. It might have been the county clerk, or an insurance salesman, or the man who drove the ice-wagon (he was a clumsy oaf). The best bet, in Ruby's case was the old sheriff himself, for while Ruby was being born he was hanging around town, grinning and pretending to be an expectant father.

Ruby looked like almost anyone. In fact, when she was hardly more than a child she had a rendezvous with one of the suspects, for which she got a crisp ten-dollar bill and a pair of silk stockings, but very little pleasure. Clutching her ten-dollar bill, she thought moodily of the shortcomings of these love

affairs, and she dreamed of a handsome virile lover who would insist on giving her marriage and respectability, though in the flesh she preferred not-so-virile men. She preferred weaklings, in fact.

When Ruby was eleven years old, her mother developed fits, preceded and followed by morose moods, anxiety states, terrors no one could fully comprehend — all this in much more exaggerated form than ever before — and a ravaging craving for affection. Then she began to make such a nuisance of herself in the streets that finally the elusive old human wreck of a sheriff was himself brought into town from his hunting grounds for the sole purpose of locking her up in the dingy ancient closet the town recognized as the county jail.

The sheriff seemed to find his duty slightly embarrassing. Grinning foolishly, he snuck up behind her on Main Street, touched her elbow gently, and tipped his hat. Her response was an overwhelming gushy smile full of winks and twerks, and he led her off with deferential dignity.

The scene was graceful and quietly amusing, quaint and quixotic, sordid only if you were possessed by high morals. But if you switched the scene to the county jail, all the peace and beauty were suddenly whisked away, leaving you with the first discovery of a monstrous deception, you fastidious people with your dreamy æstheticism.

"Lord of love, Honey," she cried, raising her scrawny old arms to grip the iron bars, "you can't leave Ida in here."

He quietly locked the doors as she coaxed and pleaded, her manner soft and melting, liquid and seductive. "Come unlock the door, Dear."

When he was walking away toward the Black Maria, which was parked under an oak not far away, and when it dawned obvious on her that she would be left alone in this secluded spot, she raised her voice in some of the most hair-raising yells ever heard in that vicinity, which had heard more than its quota.

"All right. Goddy 'ull come punish you. You won't get any suck offen me. Goddy 'ull see. Goddy 'ull see." She called to everyone who passed on the dusty crushed-shell road beyond the deep ditch and the tangle of honeysuckle around the tiny cell window.

The negroes, some of them, thought that she was voodoo. Negro children gathered in the mouth of the alley across the street from the jail and let their imaginations free to draw and paint.

"She kay gi ow thet jail." "Whu you tawknuh bow, boy? Sho she kin gi ow thet jail." Little individuals, making the most of what was given them, chiming in together to compose a legend. There was one little dusky wraith of slantboned negro who added with rolling eyes and awed inspired tones: "Shu-she shu-sucks, shu-she sucks bluhd." ("Sho nuff?" "How you know, Susy?") "Ah jis know. They allus do."

Spring winds brought their caresses, and the dust rose and bloomed in clouds and fled from the road into the cramped closet cell.

All day long her lonely voice soared in curses,

prayers, and singing, until some shocked white women were forced into public-spiritedness enough to root out the sheriff again, and Ida was driven away to the state insane asylum at Chattahoochee, where she whimpered and whined like a lost puppy.

At one time, at this time, everybody loudly pitied the children, who were living with Ida's brother out of town and Ida's sister in town (the gay lady the Old Man had in mind when he thought about putting up a kicker). But in a not so much later time, when L. G. was sixteen years old, he was sent away to the penitentiary for carving on another man's tissue with his knife. Everyone said that he was bad after all. "Bad blood will out."

From early childhood Ruby's chief companion and influence was her aunt, a rather notorious lady who initiated her into the profession through rather socially unacceptable practices, unmentionable here because they seem so depraved to our inarticulate mind. To us sex is not of words. Even rhapsodic and erotic music, delirium of poetry, sensuous theater, are only stimulants, preludes. But sex is the body and the bodymind, and the actual overtures are caresses. Consequently, we would call the initiation rituals of the gay lady perverted, because they could not lead to the logical (and biological) sexual conclusion. But if examined in that light, how much of our lives might be termed perverted. Let us not be too suspicious. Sex is not as psychical as extremists presume, and male and female are persons most of all.

If the gay lady's excessively sexual administration was likely to leave a growing girl as if drugged by

her overwhelming physical sensations, and to create an abnormal craving in that growing girl for the security of physical sensations, under the conditions the consequences were natural. So that Ruby had learned to guard herself against male callousness, to exploit in the meantime her natural charms, and to exact plenty of payment for the fawning advances of sexhungry males, to scorn and frustrate the rapacious kind of male brute. Her aunt had taught her to massage her breasts and to put gooey red paste on her lips. It may surprise you to learn that Ruby was not immune to hemorrhages of the soul. Such an obsession with sex as her life had been had not stopped her soul from bleeding. Queer.

Her most recent affair had been with the Catholic priest, a thrilling climax in her life, a rather æsthetic adventure. He had been an intense sickly and scrawny young man, who had seen her on the streets, admired her "quality," and been desirous of converting her. He was like a child. She loved him. Bedding with him was like sleeping with an angel. But the Church had seen fit to transfer him. For awhile her lip quivered at every memory of him, but after the quiet prodigious passage of weeks she had rallied again.

She was precocious in sexual wisdom. Her eyes were open to ways other girls would be deceived about all their lives. She knew men. She lived in terror of selfish brutes who violated the subtle pact that exists between mating male and female, a mutual consent and gentleness. Yet she had an open hail-fellow-well-met spunk to her.

Ezra had seen her going and coming from the

gay lady's. No matter what people said, he had averred, *he* respected her. That was before Nora's death. Nora had received this with calm maternal indulgence.

And from her distance Ruby had loved to look at him. He was so innocent. She worshipped him in much the same way as she had the supple and childishly cunning young priest. Deep men, she thought. Men of quality. Men who possessed the direct avenue to heaven.

Ezra had gone to Ruby's house one Saturday night soon after Nora's death. He had gone like a madman, a specter. He could not bear the oppressive weight of night coming on. There was no Nora to fasten himself to, and, being hungry, once having made his tremendous conclusion, he had passed with powerful stealth, supernatural vigor, to Ruby's house, where she received him with startled welcome, a wandering of her wits, amazed delight. He told her tersely that Nora ("my wife") was dead, and he sat on the edge of a chair with his hat-brim traveling a circular route in his nervous hands.

Yes, he loved her as a man loves drink. As he lay on her breasts he was an infant again. The great world wheeled and clashed in thunder and cascading cinders about him, and yet he was secure in her lullaby. He needed her at nightfall. She needed him.

He was so gentle shy that she had to force him to embrace her, it seemed. He was as pure as snow, this fifty-year-old child. His presence absolved her. It was the religiosity of her love that made it as strong as whipcord, the penitence mixed with it that gave it

its sublime tenderness. O, this love was genuine, it "did her proud." To her the fact that Ezra was a weakling was the finest compliment that could be paid him; it endowed him with an odd paradoxical strength in her ravishing eyes. That he was fifty or more meant that he was secure for her, not capricious like a young boy.

(She loved his little bones, as Nora had, and he found strength in her huge hams.)

There was a great deal of exquisite anguish in this love, which gave it a kind of deathless vigor, like the Tristan-and-Isolde affair. This love was anguished because it answered deep needs in the two most concerned, deepseated needs deeply felt and torn by a deeper resistance. In novels, in the opera, on the movie screen, love is treated as an ultimate, beside which all other emotions are regarded as superficial. In real life those "superficial" aspects are far stronger than love itself.

(What is love? Infatuation? Sensory illusion? If you love poetry, read Webster's Unabridged International, read the poem known as the definition of the word "love." The most charming mystical nonsense and allegory in that poetic form called a definition. "A feeling of strong personal attachment, ardent affection . . . desire for, and earnest effort to promote, the welfare of another, esp. as seen in God's solicitude for man and in man's due gratitude and reverence to God . . . strong liking; fondness . . . tender and passionate affection for one of the opposite sex; also, an instance of love; a love affair . . . Cupid, or Eros, as the god of love; sometimes

Venus . . . the object of affection." Don't you think this has a Shakspearean quality? The moral of this discourse is that philosophy is as true as an artificial flower. We personally like the simple words of the Nazarene: "God is love." But that is meaning lost on pagans, and we do not want to be snobbish by excluding a good part of humanity.

But, O, the tongues of angels must be infinitely communicative.)

Let's return to this strenuous love of the piddling Ezra and the religious whore. All Ezra's life-training had been against it, and yet it lived on and came erupting with volcanic violence at this time, so that the mating persons were not bodies as much as souls, and sometimes sex seemed an absurd byproduct. The mating song was a kind of nerve-sung *Liebestod,* for both felt the danger to their love and intuitively sensed that it could not go on — Ezra needed the respect of his people. The Old Man had been a father and a guide to him, and by destroying the Old Man's faith in him Ezra had become his own worst enemy. Ezra was the true hero type.

After he had taken Ruby to his house and had lost his children, Ezra quit his job at the shop and took a job with Railway Express, resumed a regularity of tempo. The death of the stationmaster had allowed for shifting among the employees, and as each took a step up, the vacancy fell among the lesserlings. It didn't matter; Ezra took the job. It was his conscience that prodded him toward the rear, instead of toward the town nucleus of job plums: a kind of panicky feeling, an odd converse longing for his for-

saken children, a stifled melancholy. Also, times were bad. The Depression was a prime monstrous specter among them. Ezra was lucky to have steady employment.

Life with Ruby sometimes seemed terribly empty, full of explosions that he could not comprehend.

(The reason all this seems so absurd is that it sounds on paper that which was not meant to sound on paper. It happened in that inarticulate world where life is a barbaric necessity and books are as childish as toys. This is secret life being told, something that is usually kept muffled forever, and does not lend itself to popular and public expression.

Alfredo of *La Traviata* was probably a bore and and a boob. Ezra's speech consisted mostly of what he didn't say. He was in actuality as laconic as ever, a little grunted phrase here and there. And Ruby was mercifully stupid where Ezra was concerned. Let us remember, when we say our prayers, to thank our stars that we are so often stupid.)

Down-and-Outers

If you were close to a psychological fatality during the Depression, you were probably that close to being one yourself. There is a moment when terror seizes a people, the Panic, when people stampede like cattle. The earth is swept by crime wave on crime wave, groundswells of unemployment and hopeless migrations.

A depression is not subject to test-tube analysis, cannot be grown like a colony of bacteria on agar.

Social experiments cannot be said to be conducted under controlled laboratory conditions. Sociology is talked in cautiously ambiguous phrases. One speaks of "trends" and "tendencies" and such. Economists say they can foresee this consequence and that. Sometimes they guess right. Good guessers deserve a prophet's berth, perhaps.

If you remember the Depression, that sordid saddening national spectacle in which people lost faith (all over the world people were lost, godless and forsaken, prey for disease), if you remember bankruptcy, crime, suicide, and the utter selfishness people know in terror, if you remember the sickness of the times, you possess the material out of which wisdom is cut and dried.

"Without vision the people perish." Needless to say, during that time the nation and Tupelo were physiques of people blind, lacking vision. No one knew who had done this to them, given them microscopic wages at a time when prices were sky-high. They only knew that they had been duped, and were duped, and did not know which way to turn or what was going to happen to them next.

The Old Man went fishing early many a morning for a dinner to cook at noon. Money was so scarce that pennies regained an old and piquant beauty. He was an old man, and his castnet was heavy to throw, but little scraps helped. Thank the Lord there were only he and the Old Woman.

Then, as if by courtesy of a magic wand, there were three more mouths to feed.

If a nation is as great as its people, a people that

comes to depend heavily on leadership, banking heavily on one man's magic, is a weak body of people. It is a fact that in March 1933 the American nation came under the dominance of one man almost to the point of a child-father relationship.

Lame and lordly Franklin Delano Roosevelt steadily grew a magical aura in office. He threw the switches and brakes that were predecessors of, if not the direct causes of, national economic recovery.

So, at the same time, the Old Man and Franklin Delano Roosevelt went to work in earnest. And their eras of responsibility and power and brain-wracking were to coincide from then on, until their deaths twelve and thirteen years later: the cultured world-famous President of the United States and the vulgarly sterling and in-his-way-just-as-cultured old man.

In the Mongrel Horde

In his lifetime the Old Man had rubbed elbows with all kinds of men. There were men like himself: laborers, soldiers, slaves to unknown principles. There were the common men, the men on the periphery.

Then he had worked for intellectuals, men of science, whom the common men prowling on the periphery had to watch for signs of the changing times. These were men of more highly specialized senses, attuned to the frequencies of the unknown principles. And in his way the Old Man was like them too.

That was why, when the Old Man went back to

work in earnest, with five mouths to feed instead of two, five lives to feel responsible for instead of two no-account ones, and the immediacy of the future pressing on his heels, he was more prepared than some.

He ferreted out plumbing jobs, odd carpentry, etc., with singlemindedness, and as his work was fine he was given what jobs there were. There was barely enough to eat. Still, there was enough.

After climbing up under a house and investigating pipes and sewers, he would get home in the evenings, worn and grimy, to hear the children whining and fighting among themselves (symbolizing the violent nature of childhood, when discipline is a new and uncomfortable harness). They seemed to get more irritable about that time in the afternoon, when the air was a golden haze and the environment was red with the sun, and the shadows stretched snakily along the earth.

"Queeit."

"Queeeeit."

"Queeeeit it, naow!"

Then there would be screams and little shrieks and the sound of something falling, little sharp thuds and scudding sounds, impact of boy fist against soft cushioning flesh, and the Old Woman screaming, "You're worse than varmints! I wish the devil would come get you!"

The Old Man would feel like whimpering and weeping, but he would only be quietly gruff as he stomped up the back steps and shuffled through the house. The children all became quiet and slightly

dazed, as if by awe, in his presence. He would not look at them or call one of them by name unless forced to: he did not want to single any one of them out for rebuke; he wanted them to learn to share good luck and punishment, joy and pain. But as he passed on through the room toward his bedroom he said quietly, "Children, cut out this foolishness." Usually they obeyed. A silence came about, so dense a pin's tinkle was as remarkable as a detonation of dynamite.

He never let the children see that he was worried or near the breaking-point. Somehow he always managed to create a contagious illusion of power and security. He was pitiless with himself. He possessed self-discipline.

He managed to make about ten dollars a week at the shop, and sometimes he made as much as fifteen dollars a week doing plumbing. Whereas Brown, across the street with his menagerie, was making only forty dollars per month at the cyprus mill, and poor Black was laid off, his wife down in the shrimp factory. What would happen to them? Even the gay lady was pinched by the times.

The Old Woman worked "like a nigger," boiling clothes in the big sooty black pot in the yard, cooking collard greens she had managed to coax out of her poor coarse soil, carrying the children down to the beaches to pick up driftwood for the woodstove. She could think of a thousand and one ways to squeeze a penny, and the Old Man piously thanked his stars many a day for her dexterous management. She carried it to extremes, perhaps.

She had a mania for saving string, rolling it up into little balls, and she saved all kinds of bottles. When she walked on a street she kept its surface under sharp scrutiny, hoping to find lost coins. She had not bought a new dress in five years. She let the children play in little more than tatters. They felt a sharp dividing line between themselves and other children because of their clothes. They kept to themselves and stared abroad and looked ashamed and were almost morbidly eager and timid.

It hurt the Old Man to see the children denied. It hurt him more keenly than he could tell. It made him want to weep. Instead, he took a renewed and pathetic interest in God, *his* God, and he prayed now, found much solace in prayer. He might be standing on the porch looking for signs of weather changes, but he would be silently praying, and no one knew. It made him feel stronger, renewed, somehow.

Tired as they were, the Old Man and the Old Woman took the three children to the first Halloween carnival after Nora's death. The Old Man had eighty cents in his pocket to last out the week.

Because this was the time of the Depression, the Halloween Carnival was held in the Armory so that at the same time the Baptist Women's Missionary Union might hold a rummage sale across the street in Spooner Hall. There was a purpose in the Baptist ladies having a rummage sale right across the street from the carnival headquarters. Those ladies knew they were in the midst of a Depression.

As the quintet came up the sidewalk toward the blaring dazzling brilliant atmospheres of the Carni-

val, the Old Lady saw the rummage sale sign and spoke aloud the first and omnipresent desire in her mind as it came with a new appearance, a new thought. "Papa," she said slowly and emphatically, "instead of us spending our money on foolishness, let's go into that rummage sale there and buy some clothes for the children."

There was an awkward silence, the children visibly growing pale and mournful, outraged and helpless. Then little Ethel spoke up — she was usually the one who blurted out when a spokesman was needed — with that prim look around her mouth which meant that she was close to tears. "We don't want those old clothes," she said proudly. But as valiantly as she tried, she could not hide the bleak crushed look about her dark flashing eyes.

Then spake the Old Man lightly, "Naw," as if the idea was absurd. "Let's go have some fun."

And the Old Woman must have received the radiation of his silent appeal, for she seemed to acquiesce mutely.

It cost him and the Old Woman fifteen cents apiece to get in, and each of the children a dime, so that of eighty cents, twenty remained. He gave each of the children a nickel to spend, and he and the Old Woman sat back on benches at the far end of the auditorium. They said nothing. They mourned. Every now and then they could see the little shabby trio as it wandered about, gazing hungrily at the cheap razzledazzle displays. Finally little Mutt screwed up his courage enough to buy an ice cream cone while Ethel warned and scolded him for the brazen stout-

ness of his deed, and then little Hilliard wanted one too, so that Ethel also was finally persuaded to part with that precious and potent bit of nickel, and their nickels were spent.

(It goes like wind and water.)

Then, with no money, and only a lingering sweetness from their lips on their licking tongues, they were finally ready to go home. It made a keening in the Old Man's heart. It took sheer guts to keep his feelings from showing all over his features.

He did not say anything — no, never a word — but as he placed his hands on the children's heads or shoulders to guide them his touch was velvety tender, like a caress. It was an apology and a pledge to them and the voice of his heart. And the children felt the beauty of his hand's pressure. It left brief beautiful scars.

(When such a man is gentle his gentleness is like a warm clear flame. He surpasses woman on her own grounds as much as woman distinguishes herself on invasions into his social territories.

There is not so much difference between the sexes that the modern Samson and Delilah, when the basic calls of sex are heard, cannot perceive in each other a likeness independent of sex, common ideals and practices that determine whether they shall respond to each other like dogs or love each other like human beings. Is it too bad that love cannot be a homely thing of lucid sanity and patience and mutual agreements, that love is a thing of whims and will-o'-the-wisps?)

Yes, the children felt his hand, and almost sub-

consciously they felt reassured, and they loved him, and they had faith in him. His intelligence and theirs was one of feeling.

(Could a great musician, of Beethoven's stature say, be called an educator of the emotions, or does he merely appeal to educated emotions? Is there a school of art that claims as its aims emotional education of the people and has all of humanity in its credo?)

The Old Man plucked up little Hilliard in his arms — they made a small topheavy mountain — and steered for the door through the tempestuous throng, the Old Woman and two children progressing in his wake.

The hurlyburly was in the streets by this time and swarming through town. Fences were toppling, gates disappearing, and legions of ghosts rioting in the dark alleys. Prominent everywhere were children who might be classified as modern American as much as a piece of period furniture might be called Xerxes III or Kublai Khan. There were children who had been reared as luminosities, sole characters (only child), vociferous leaders in *hoi polloi,* well-to-do children who had been denied nothing, treated like saints and sages before they could walk or talk.

But the Old Man had a comforting faith that in the long run, "his" children would have souls infinitely more penetrating and fine. Already at times they showed a timid sweet quiet sanity, an unselfishness and rare devotion toward each other, at least

in the sight of the prejudiced Old Man. He predicted that they would be, in many ways, more mature, more wise.

The Old Man had a fervent desire to tell "his" children something they were still too young to understand. He heard it sung loud and clear in his mind: "Patience, my children." Patience. Time moves with you in the lessons of today, the bending of your elbows, your wandering thoughts. Patience. Infinite Patience. Pain and fever will pass, tomorrow will come; relax and live patiently with today. Through patience and deliberation you will achieve a kind of beauty you never dreamed of — the beauty of realizations.

Late into that night, when the little house approximated silence and darkness save where the streetlight peered loudly through the window and shadows flickered on the wall from leaves dancing in the almost inaudible highpitched windsinging air, the Old Man lay excruciatingly awake. Insomnia carried with it the dread feeling of being out of proportion, of being lost in an outer world that will not obey the commands of the inner realm of the soul.

The Old Man struggled with this feeling of frustration and defeat, and was grateful for any diverting sound that might hasten objectivity and relaxation and the tiny brief imperceptible and sudden transition into sleep. More than once the relentless energetic grip of insomnia had been loosened by a dog's sharp barking ("That must be Tolliver's Midge") cleaving space. The tiny sharp axlike wild

cries of a dog blocks away were a vent for the Old Man's pent-up feelings — the bludgeoning interrogations of a dog.

The Little Zealots

Sometimes the Old Woman felt at rope's end. She would gather her a few small peach switches to threaten the children with, and she would desperately conjure strange little schemes and punishments so that she would not be forced to carry out her threats. She could not switch them. Once upon a time she had felt vigorous displeasures and been sternly puritanical toward her own daughters, making Nora and her sister Ruth sit like little ramrods on the sofa, wear long dresses that fell below their ankles, cook and sew and sweep and be quiet as possible when adults were around.

Once, when she had caught them in a lie, she had switched her rebellious daughters until she could see red stripes upon the skin of their legs. The punishment had been hers after all. You remember the saying, "This hurts me worse than it does you." She had never forgotten how she had inflicted pain. On those climactic days and nights of their deathbed scenes she had, at some time or other, remembered and grieved that her memories should contain such sores.

Now when the house was swept by gales of hard childish mirth or the evening quiet was disturbed by little giggle-tizzies in their bedroom, the Old Woman merely said mildly, "The children are having a good

time," and she and the Old Man were glad. She had terrible yearnings to "spile" them, to bless them and smother them with the affection of which they had been robbed. But her scrawny sunken little chest with its flat breasts was not the inviting sofa pillow it once had been, and her touch was ephemeral: it had lost its motherliness. She could not be what a mother would have been.

Once she shut Mutt into a closet, but she left him in it only ten minutes, and he emerged with an undampened enthusiasm for life. "Little scalawag," she had murmured to herself, more tenderly than not. When he had gotten his little pants so filthy, by crawling extensively under houses in some excess of industry, that she was afraid washing them would remove the cloth along with other substances, she had had him take them off and had given him no substitute. He was forced to hide in bed and spend the afternoon in the binding comfort of its cloth and cushion while all the frenzied activity of the blazing blue out-of-doors (which his imagination so richly endowed) spent itself on fortunates.

The bedroom became like a desert. He was parched and miserable. And the Old Woman in the backyard wept to the daymoon. When she gave him his pants that night she feasted him with plums and indulged him, his conversation, until even the memory of his ordeal seemed rubbed out. He was a hero.

(While living with him she had learned to respect, to "love," him. Punishing him was like punishing herself. She did not like to doubt him. He was now part of her life.)

Now that Hilliard had passed the age of six, the school-going duo had become a trio, and except during summer vacation, most of their waking hours seemed to be concerned with school. School seemed to be the purpose of children's days. School was where they would wait until they came of age, until their muscles and their wombs and their attitudes were ready. Meanwhile they were puppetized, the assumption being that they were in training for life. Poor children.

At school they were separated into batches separated in turn by thin walls. For each batch there was a teacher sitting behind her desk in the front of the room. These teachers were, collectively speaking, of loud voice and belligerent manner. Unless each woman (rarely a man) possessed the hide of an elephant, she was not well insulated against the noise and the chalkdust and selfish belligerency of her pupils, who were likely to collect as a little mob and howl her down if she wasn't careful, or who might merely form an organized conspiracy (some of their fathers belonged to the last vestiges of the Ku-Klux Klan) and gaze at her with silent enmity. In the upper grades, pupils usually rebelled against the teachers individually and with fiendish hatred and snooty contempt, symbols of frustration, but Ethel, Mutt, and Hilliard were still of the elementary grades. There were about two-and-twenty little human engines chugging along in each batch. The problem was, should the teacher entertain them with nonsense or force them to manipulate symbols toward

the eventual mastery of ideas, and where was the dividing line?

"Fred," she might feel forced to speak sweetly and coldly severe to the rollicking squirmy Mutt, "pick up that spitball and bring your rubber band up here please." Under his breath he would mutter for the benefit of impressionable girls, "O, fer Pete's sake," and would saunter, nonchalant and barefooted, to the front of the room.

The Old Man realized that the children were falling through a bottomless chasm emotionally, and he struggled to help them find their niches. He tried to give them the proper attitudes of lively curiosity and responsibility and tenderness. He tested his powers of illustration, wracking his brain for entertaining enlightenment, imaginative lessons, pertinent anecdotes.

He told them about his schooldays (two years of the long ago), feeding them figments of his imagination. Lies, you might have called them, but they were elegant lies, good lies. He told them about his daughters' schooldays, and would have told them about the Old Woman's schooldays if he hadn't been afraid she would make indignant denials, and he told them about schooldays everywhere. He endowed his anecdotes with humor and told them with great fierce relish. Then he helped each child with his lessons. It was from the Old Man they received spiritual guidance. He percolated education.

The Fairy Tale

(Haunts and terrors were our natural heritage, impositions on our exuberance and joy, and we lived at extremes of boundless energy and fatigue. We were always shuttling to and fro between extremes. We forced the many hues of experience into the divisions of black and white. The witch was black and evil, the hero and heroine were snow-white. Red meant danger. If we were good we obtained wealth and kingdoms. If we were evil we became poor and begged. Our fathers brought us food, and we never anticipated hunger.

Ever since, we have hungered for true fairy tales, for witches we could stone and princes and princesses we could adore. We have despised those who might threaten us and we have envied those "lucky" enough to appear lighted up like princes and princesses in pure dazzling white.

Why must we grow up and learn the bitter truth that the world, like the wash on the lines in the admonishing soap advertisements, is largely tattletale gray — and that we had better conform, or else? . . .

Why must we learn the damning truth that we are responsible in our minute quantities for the enormous blunders of the unwieldly world?

Why must we be such vapid soft ineffectual people, confused and confusing?

Why must we find selflessness so difficult and deny ourselves the luxurious feeling of doing good be-

cause we are so engrossed in those colossal conceits, the problems of our souls?

What is the purpose . . .

Why are we?)

Already the pure ore was being tarnished, the ugly spots appearing in the beautiful, the innocuous becoming the sin. To the children life had been shocking. Death had played its hideous joke.

But still they were amused and bemused by their toys. They were still young. Maturity had not pressed on them its full force; experience crowded them, yet was too sparse.

Sometimes the Old Man gave them each a dime to go to the Saturday-night movies. He did this deliberately, despite all the frowns and pouts and suppressed furies of the Old Woman, who saw a shameful waste of money in his generosity.

The movies perpetuated the fairy tales. Cinderella was revised again and again. The mosaic people, voided of their prosaic human feelings by virtue of the script, and given odd moments of superhuman debasements and exaltations so common to drunkards, were licked up by hungry little souls.

Coming home over the crooked paths and rutty streets the children rehearsed the old fairy tales again and again, with the old emotional hurricanes and delight.

Only now it was Hoot Gibson and Bob Steele and Buck Jones, Richard Dix, and sometimes Clark Gable. It was Joan Crawford and some adolescent looking cowgirl and Ann Harding and Sylvia Sidney, and once Greta Garbo.

Ethel dreamed of being a gorgeous and powerful dancer, whirling in eddies of rhythms across polished floors, filling men's eyes with wonder. Mutt dreamed of a million-and-one hairbreadth escapes from death, of swooping across deserts on raven steeds. Hilliard *was* all of these bizarre and gorgeous lives: there was no doubt in his mind.

In the misty moonlight night he heard the cock, which had heard a stick snap in the stillness, raise its operatic voice in gorgeous stridency — a solo without the rose-velvet resonance of wood, but with a mellow plastic, a celluloid connotation, perhaps, a Byzantine sound, an ur ur-ur ur-ooooo-ur. And Hilliard *was* the cock. And then he fell fast asleep, while all over the town other cocks were answering the clarion call, some faintly, some close by, some tenor, some a horny bass, long afterwards and late into the night.

The Author's Soliloquy

While we are off on this foot, humor the author and walk this digression out with her.

Thank God Nora had not lived!

Imagine that Nora had lived.

Nora would have been a sweetheart to her sons, just as she had been a mother to her sweetheart. She could not separate the two forms of possession. No, we do not mean that Nora would have slept with her sons. But she would have demanded their unstinted trust and devotion by the simple expedient of lavishing her regard on them.

Friendship so often degenerates into tyrannies.

The most intense passions of love are never far from boiling hatred. Maternal monsters are so numerous it is difficult to criticize them. Sometimes they seem to wreak miracles through their children (long-armed retributions), producing artists who in turn produce delight (often insane delight).

Now look at Ethel. Ethel's need was not for a mother. The sweetheart a mother represents to a son is usually a tyrant to a daughter. Nora would have smothered Ethel, making another psychic monster of her daughter. (Who of your acquaintances is not a psychic monster? You can count them on your fingers? And are you the norm? Is anyone normal?) Ethel's need was for a father, that she might realize the male instead of idealizing him. Ezra might never have satisfied her need for a father. The Old Man came a long way closer. Yet still she needed an example.

The Old Woman and Ethel were usually at cross purposes. The Old Woman got very bitter and sarcastic sometimes when she described Ethel to the Old Man. It seemed that whenever she drew near Ethel a dark cloud hovered over the child, for Ethel felt an esthetic revulsion whenever she looked at the worn leather-*crepe* countenance of the Old Woman. Ethel, at an early age, was sick of women in general, and placed all her hope in a heavenly delivery of some male angel, a father, to her. Ethel hungered for man.

So that, Nora gone, for these three young children, cute as bedbugs, the Universe had a mixed-up policy:

For Hilliard there was hope of great futures, for in him there had been created a great hunger that only infinite patience and plodding could cure. He possessed a psychic wound that might make a great person of him in his pursuit of level health *if*. We speak of spiritual greatness, not fame. (Spiritual greatness is at once the most expensive and least expensive luxury men can enjoy — it is so inexpensive any man can have it if he is willing to pay with his life for it. You see how close in concept the Puritans were to spiritual greatness, to be so far. What they lacked was a realism that necessitated tolerance and a degree of compromise.)

For Mutt there were great amusements waiting: timidity was forced upon him, and of the three children he was always first to rebel in favor of fun, zesty adventures in the inane, and potluck satisfaction.

While for Ethel there was — insanity, perhaps. No, Ethel would always be a half-person, living in envy and bitterness and nervous waste, anxiety. For she had no older brother and sister to be a teacher to her as she was to Hilliard. Because Hilliard was the closest approximation to a lover she could lay her hands upon, she made him a gift of the best tenderness and intelligence she had in her. Unspoken, unspeakable, lay in her the subtle knowledge that he was a potential, if not a kinetic, lover. You see how she was coiled, and now that she was ten, eleven, soon twelve, years old, what could be done for Ethel?

Hilliard reacted to the world with searching eyes and put off the ready answers. Mutt reacted with

eager submission and adaptation to currents of meaningful meaninglessness. Ethel reacted with fear and jealousy and anxiety, much as Hilliard and Mutt reacted, only in much stronger and more terrible degree than either, because her imagination was capable, at her age, of developing and elaborating those characteristics.

Anyway, that's the way things looked at the time. "Time would tell." Human natures are changeable.

Ezra, the Kidnapper

Inscrutable figure on the streets! Curious fellows stopped him on the downtown sidewalks to put subtle interrogations to him personally for their own satisfaction and for that of their wives. Groups of women, both strapping and scrawny varieties, wheeling baby carriages, lugging parcels, steering rambunctious shackledown Fords, saw him and broke into little sizzling whispers, bold sarcasm, arch vehemence, aërial laughter.

The mongrel dogs that pranced through the town's out-of-the-way streets knew him, came and sniffed him, loped off to sprinkle trees and lightpoles. Children of energetic mind and grasping ears, trailing him on the sidewalks of sidestreets, sniggered brazenly, bursting with overripe secrecy. Hee-hee-haw-haw-ho-ho-ha-ha. Lo, the lascivious mourner, the luster after Ruby.

(If each home had not been so full of its own confused emotions and heartbreak and hardacres, perhaps nothing at all would have been said. But the

social code had formed to take care of those exigencies, and Ezra had broken the social code. He must be punished.)

Ezra's punishment was self-perpetuated. He had been quiet and solitary by habit too long to hear or see over much of the notoriety he had occasioned. Wisecracks, malicious glees, scorn — while he was sensitive to all this, he was kept too busy fighting himself or the ghost within himself, phantom quarrels that wrecked again his flickering wreck of a spirit, to fight externals. He knew much misery, and misery's boon companions, physical ache and poor digestion.

There were still plenty of people who were not snow-white themselves who were perfectly willing to seek excuses for him. The "broadminded" people, like the beauty-parlor operator who was herself living with the chairman of the school board in unmarried grandeur. She told the dentist's wife as she "set" the wife's hair, in a modest explanatory manner she told it: "I'm broadminded about life." To which the dentist's wife murmured something indistinguishable, and the moment slipped by.

It was the plaudits of ribald people that Ezra chiefly dreaded and abhorred, and to his anguished horror they now made him one of them. It showed in the sly winks the saloonkeeper made him in the vestibule of the bank, in contrast to the rather detached contempt with which the Methodist teller treated him. Men off the bowery, with whom Ezra had had nothing to do until this time, engaged him in loud conversation at odd moments, presuming to tickle

his fancy with their sallies. Women who had been baptized in scandal bantered him in public, and in private made a scapegoat of him.

All of this was obvious to Ezra, and it made him bow his head low. For he thought the old and stringent thoughts. In a sense he was as pure and tyrannical as Cotton Mather.

Then too, he was scared. Of whom? The Old Man, and even, to a more moderate and remote degree, his own children. It was the Old Man chiefly, for Ezra knew the man. The Old Man was something tough and immortal and somehow saintly despite his pigheadedness and prejudices. Ezra's vaguely wandering eyes and uneasy stammering had not been there when Ezra had been the son and lover of the sumptuous Nora.

Ezra had gone to work down at the ramshackle depot, in buildings overgrown by vines like octopuses, squids, and where weeds were as high and foliated as trees, because there Ezra felt remote. He didn't want to meet up with the Old Man if he could help it. No siree.

Well, eventually that very thing came to pass. Ezra was walking down the sidewalk just as the Old Man came moseying out of Hook's drugstore. Ezra tried to arrange his features in an unimpeachable smile, and instead felt them jerk into a nervous leer. The sweat appeared on his forehead magically like dew. He kept walking, mechanically, not having even an idiotic idea how his legs kept him upright and in locomotion, feeling that he stumped with a ridiculous sway. His mind tied itself up into a knot, his

fists clenched helplessly. On Ezra's face was the pale glare of a man who abruptly finds himself walking down Main Street without any pants on and hopes wildly, fervently, that it is only a dream.

The Old Man simply stood to one side with an impulsive motion and let him pass, remarking to himself in mumbojumbo, "Well, if you ain't a beaut." So soliloquized the Old Man, and then he went his way.

Well, the crisis passed, and the Old Man impatiently forgot it, but that moment seldom left Ezra thereafter. With mysterious clarity he had heard the Old Man's ejaculation of disgust. With an almost photographic lucidity he kept in his imagination his sensations at that time. With fidelity he took his memory out and pored over it feverishly.

Until that time he had refused to face the future with sanity, and now he found even the present so out of control that he was flabbergasted. A sinister wild bravura began to take him under like an undertow. He began to change his personality — that is, it began to change despite him — in subtle ways, oh, such subtle ways! He was desperately holding on to his sanity by his fingernails. His personality seemed to change in direct ratio to his effort.

He had moments of absurd hilarity that would make one who had not seen him for some time gasp. He would squeal and giggle, tickling Ruby as he lounged through her breakfasts, relating jokes with a ferocious glee and sadism, and once in bed he bit her breast with an unexpected savagery that filled Ruby with a momentary fury-temper and with a

more gradual uneasiness and terror. "How would you like it if I gave your tail a yank — " she began in ugly threatening tones, to which he answered by smothering her with kisses and caresses so exquisite that she got weak as a kitten.

When finally she began to perceive his changing nature, she was inclined to credit herself with "bringing him out" like the butterfly from the cocoon. Her tender shy fifty-year-old child with his ascetic look had become an angel and a demon.

She consulted the "gay lady" about these things (the gay lady came to see *Ruby* these days, because the location of her own house was so awkward, so near to the Old Man) and Ruby noisily trumpeted her triumph, but beneath the laurel she began to feel a little chilled. However, terror can be quite delicious. She loved Ezra, she embraced him more vigorously than before, more excessively, and he her. He had never seemed so ardent, so eager. She called him her baby; meanwhile she was telling her jaded pursylipped old aunt that "Ezry's a deep un." Sometimes her spine was given to shivers; she managed to keep her anxiety hidden even from the most cogent aspect of herself, but it spread its subtle poison intravenously. However, she still considered herself a tower of spunk and success.

Once Ezra gave way, the end was sudden. He had begun to have hauntingly real nightmares, during which he yelled out, sobbed convulsively, cursed, all in an amazing and un-Ezralike fashion. He would suddenly disappear during working hours and not reappear until the following morning. He was also

periodically a victim of melancholia of the profoundest nature, irresponsible, strangely insensitive, like a swamp — despondent, gloomy, in torpor.

Then suddenly he would go to work for about a week with passionate zeal, accomplishing miracles and maintaining insane energy.

Just as suddenly he burned out again, sat in a chair in paralytic postures, his anguished face like the face of a martyr, torn and smitten.

He would weep, then rise and drive himself like a madman.

Meanwhile Ruby gave vent to angers, trying to frighten him back into line. She broke the mental barrier and went to see her aunt, sat moaning. "What's going to come of us?"

Ezra woke from a powerful dream one night, a threshing sleep, to find the light on and dazzling in his eyes, and Ruby standing over him with a wild look of despair and suffering on her tight face.

"I've got to get my children," he shouted at her, and he leaped from bed and began feverishly to dress. Ruby talked and talked, spouted volumes of words, angry words, tender words, persuasive words, and finally put him back to bed. He seemed to forget this episode.

(But in reality he remembered it with cunning, determined to use her arguments, all of which seemed feeble to him, against her sometime when she betrayed herself a little farther. He would produce them like a bolt from the blue; she would stammer and turn pale as a sheet. He was convinced that all the people in town were producing a monstrous de-

ception for him. He himself admired their artistry as displayed in their cool manner and gigantic lies. Except that he would show them, with remarkable aplomb, that he was no less clever. He would go on playing ball with them for awhile until a zero hour, when he would suddenly reveal them in all their monstrous duplicity and denounce them for the hypocritical fools they were.)

Meanwhile the Old Woman had seen Ruby go over to the gay lady's house — the Old Woman had been standing in her own bleak yard at the time and had seen her — and was so indignant that the Old Man came home several hours later to find her still raving about "the nerve of that stinking woman."

Said Ruby to Ezra in order to shock him to his senses, "If you don't quit acting that away, Ezry, I'm going to leave you."

It almost seemed to work, for awhile.

One Saturday Morning

A beautiful Saturday morning in May. Tempestuous Saturdays, when schoolchildren are free. It was 1933. Even in the midst of the Depression, Saturday mornings could be boons, and the sunlight on the sea like a hoard of gold.

How beautiful the world can be if one is poor. Poverty can be a stimulus to the imagination. Then all automobiles look luxurious, such marvelous inventions, and vegetables coming up out of the earth are holy, to be watered and treated with care, that they may ripen into splendor. Then old magazines

are treasures of art and all motion pictures are dreamboats.

It is also good to feel anonymous, one in many young 'uns, and irresponsible. (All the time dreaming of being a movie star or a famous explorer while washing dishes or toting wood.)

Hilliard and Mutt were out in the alley building a cave. The wind was ravishing. The earth was damp from a heavy dew, and cobwebs glittered in the grasses like caches of jewels. The cold of the night had lost its electric brilliance, and the air was humid, sapping the energy.

The Old Man came out into the alley before he set out for town. Unobserved he watched the boys for a minute, almost enviously. "Ho hum," he yawned, "I sure feel bum." He wanted to go to sleep, he felt dozey. Just moseying around was hard labor. "If your Grandma asks ya, tell her I'm gone," he said, and set off at an impulsive trot to shake up his blood.

He had been gone less than a half-hour when the boys were interrupted by a sudden apparition, a flesh-and-blood Ezra, in fact. He beckoned to them from about ten feet away. There was an eager smile on his face, a more animated face than the one they had known.

When they had known him day by day they had not been aware of him, critical of his features, as they would have been if he had been a stranger. Now, as they had not seen him for some months, they suddenly saw him as Ezra, a speaking acquaintance, un-

familiar (yet how familiar!). They were confused. What was he to them?

Ezra looked like one of those saints in a mediæval mosaic, with large popping black eyes, stiff gestures of bloodless body and limbs, hollow thin face. He must have called to them at least once, but he had never had but a thin wafer of a voice: it would not carry.

And now he stood there with that strange strained eager look in his eye, a kind of fanatic. What a shame Ethel was not there to represent them, for she might have flown to him like a gust of wind, and they might have swiftly followed then, and all of them been transported beyond the alley, "gone-gone" in ten minutes, evaporated from their grandparents' territory. (Oh, there would have been a court battle all right, for the old folks' danders were up, and they had grown accustomed to the alteration in their home.)

Ethel entertained such romantic notions about Ezra.

The boys sat quite still, Hilliard, mouth open, curious and patiently waiting for Mutt, his elder brother, to give the high sign. Mutt had a look of dubiousness, of calm argument, on his face.

Ezra grew weary of standing there with hands slightly outstretched, palms open beside his thighs. He took a hasty step forward. "Grandma!" Hilliard screamed.

"Woo?" answered Grandma from the bowels of the house. Hilliard rose shakily from the earth, broke

into a run, disappeared through the gate with piercing screams, Mutt, a little dazed, following close after.

When Grandma went into the alley it was utterly deserted. But the air seemed to tremble and quake a little, as if some Frankenstein's monster had passed that way, and though no one appeared, a presence had made itself known.

Home, Sweet Home

After they had discussed it together, while smelling coffee and leisurely buttering their buns, they decided to ask the children. Then they went to work eating, chewing good white yeasty bread avidly, the Old Man slurping his coffee so powerfully it seemed to rise into the air out of the cup under the suction through his lips.

Because their table manners — principally the Old Man's — were ferocious (the Old Woman affected the baton-waving little finger and other such superfluous devices), Ethel had periods of hot hatred for them. To Ethel the elegance her schoolmates seemed to have inherited was splendid and necessary. And intangible.

She sat in the next room getting her homework, and she wept in anger, great swabbing outlet sobs, to hear the snorts and whistles of false teeth. Whenever the Old Man took a draught of coffee, afterwards he always ejaculated, "Hah!" This was her crucifixion. She was all nerves. And there was no one to tell it to. Enormous self-pity reared within her.

So that night as she helped the children bathe off their showiest dirt in the pan behind the kitchen stove (and how sweet little Hilliard looked with his naked little body slick and running with suds, so clean and small and neat — a child's body is so compact and free of the stink and hair of an adult's) the Old Woman began to talk to them.

"Children, you know your granddaddy and grandma just love you to death. We wouldn't have anything happen to you for the world. It'd kill us if there did."

That was good news. They were important personages.

"Because we love you so much — why, we just think the world of you," continued the Old Woman, "it worries us to death to think that that . . . that stinking scoundrel might try to take you off. Now, you children don't want that, do you?"

This last was uttered in a coaxing tone. The children were, all of them, gravely listening, their eyes turned upward so that halfmoons of bluish white held their image-stricken pupils up to the fringed border of their own eyelids, their cheeks rosy and clean-smelling and fresh. They were literally and figuratively wet behind the ears. The children, eager and curious and irresponsible. Even as the Old Woman talked, Hilliard's hands were grasping and squeezing the multi-colored foam, so that it squirted and oozed in its inimitable fashion.

The soap slipped out of Ethel's hand into the shallow light-distorting water. Hilliard obligingly stooped to retrieve it, his narrow little buttocks

barely making a dent in the limp malleable surface of the water, but he giggled, it tickled so.

"Oh, Lord," the Old Woman had thought many times, with her authoritarian assumption of responsibility, "if only we could keep them young." And this in the face of the fact that the sooner they outgrew the home the sooner they would cease to be a care. But small children are so playful, like puppies, so easily clothed and amused.

To Ethel and Mutt thoughts came spanging. Yes, even Mutt's face showed serious consideration.

The Old Woman had said, in so many words, that this was home. Well, now, what about this?

(Home is what we know. Home is what they knew. It was where they had located and circulated in hellish whirligigs like demons. It was where they developed stealth and stamina and secrecy, where they reached almost to the point of death in joy. It was where immediacy brusquely stomped upon the little quivering tentacles of mental exploration, and where many kinds of imaginative enterprise were forbidden.

Wherever a child grows, he is home, whether it be in Boston boweries or in a canebrake. To a child his environment is precious. Ugliness is truly hideous, horrors are truly terrible, love is an overwhelming immensity, every new fact has a lustrous importance, and beauty is something to be seized.

These three children would never forget their first home, which, looked back at, would seem like heaven. Their first home was the world they could not question. It was beyond the present and the future as

well as the immediate past. It was like a castle in the clouds. It had its inimitable beautiful and secure rosy hue.

It would always seem to them that they were different persons from those first prehistoric children. They were split persons, new growths cut off from the virgin tissue, not seedlings but grafts, and there was more than one indication that even at present, already, a nameless longing for their sheltering origins possessed them with painful frequency.

Even the most civilized man, who has learnt disciplines and self-control, cannot ratiocinate away that scent, that echo, that blur in consciousness, which keeps him stretched tenuously toward the past, toward his private garden-of-Eden days. It lingers like a suspicion, but with infinitely more powerful spiritual meaning.

Perhap those same adults can ratiocinate away all the deep vibrant primeval emotional quakes that threaten them in the present and make their existence doubly meaningful. But unless they be victims of amnesia, past experience always has its steady hold on them, and far back is heard the voice of their origins, where their psyche first came into absorptive and assimilative being.

And sometimes to each of us, in the deepest existence in the present, and like an aura to some experience and a spontaneous radiation in the midst of it, comes a reminder to which our whole being vibrates instinctively. A subtle homishness, which makes us ache ambiguously for what we have forgotten.

The child makes the home that the man or woman will almost always remember, return to in suppressed desires through dreams that make him or her throb with a hallowed anguish, dreams whose montages seem strangely familiar, like faces in old photographs, half found again. Poignance, elegaic poignance, excruciating nostalgia. All persons are naturally sentimental. You did not know this because you do not know them, you thought it was just you. Sentimentality may take the form of vehemence or tears or exaltation. Some people seem less sentimental than others because the expression is far less obvious, and takes a peculiarly personal form.)

To return to the children: Little Hilliard had just passed one of those perpetual markers in his life. At the age of six he was beginning to sense more strongly the peculiar alien world in which he was placed, to sense it before him like a puzzle. He would spend adolescence, the body-changing years, studying it most intensely! He missed his mother. Yea, for though he walked through the valley of shadow, she had been with him: to put him on the pot, feed him, jabber with him, and hold him to her monstrous cushioning warmth, making him content to be nourished by her power, the female powerhouse. But pain, coming at the time it did, was exceedingly valuable. By tearing down his playhouse in his early life, fate made possible the building of a fortress. Hilliard's doom was that far sealed. There would be further years of pain, the pain of education, years of neuroses. Maturity is made of all manner of things.

Meanwhile Grandma and Granddaddy were his only security aside from Mutt and Ethel, whose weaknesses he saw. Leave Grandma and Granddaddy? At present he said never. He could not conceive of life without them. Even when Grandma threatened to spank him, especially then, he knew that life would be disintegrated without her admonitions. In his quiet little way he probably worshipped his Grandma and Granddaddy in much the same way a priest worships God. That God is troublesome I doubt that a priest would deny.

Not so with Ethel and Mutt.

Would Ethel and Mutt have gone with Ezra if he had presented his case well? Yes. They would have gone without a qualm, eagerly. But it is dubious that Ezra in his emotional state could have presented his case well. He might scare them to death.

In the *perpetuum mobile* of time, in the eternal transitions individuals undergo from infancy, puberty, more clearly marked than most any other stages, overtakes us. Mutt was still about five years away from that onrushing stake. Boys seem usually to mature at the age of fourteen or thereabouts. Ethel was precocious, a little. She was noticeably nearing the end of the comparatively neuter days of childhood, when the guise of the male or female is being prepared.

Perhaps that was why she had such delirious daydreams, in which Ezra became a tragic-heroic figure, slandered, yet noble enough to come and get her. At night she dreamed that he held her in his arms and kissed her and caressed her. This dream recurred

again and again, a strange dream, rending her emotional equilibrium. In her dreams Ezra was a handsome man, a Christlike figure.

To Grandma, of course, Ethel agreed promptly that she did not want to leave Grandma and Granddaddy. It was a white lie, and she had sense enough to tell it.

To Mutt it mattered not overly much where he was so long as he was comfortable and amused and pampered. Oh, yes, he was good and cheerful, but his goodness was a chameleon that changed its hue to the hue of the situation in which he found himself, and his cheerfulness was also of remarkable adaptability.

One evening in September 1934 Ezra came again. The children were just coming in, tired and hungry, from playing out in the streets. Ezra met them at the end of the long narrow alley. Not twenty feet behind them came the Old Man. Blue smoke from the kitchen chimney swirled down into the alley. A smell of bacon frying came like a lust and a hymn.

Ezra was too intent on winning the children to see anything else. He was smiling so, so sweetly and extending his hands again, this time calling to them in a little falsetto hum, much as a man might talk to a dog to persuade it to give its trust.

Ethel was along this time to assume the leadership. "Hello," she said tremulously, her thoughts blown like a whirlwind, a terrible little frown of uncertainty and anxiety etching the little plateau between her brows. The "Hello" twanged with a curious flatness.

"This is Daddy," hummed Ezra eagerly. His beaver eagerness lighted him like a blaze. He determined to press his advantage.

Then quickly, like a thunderclap, there was the Old Man, life-size and more, and never so terrible. With one hand brought up like a mitt, the Old Man caught the back of Ezra's head and propelled it earthward in a wide arc, the while the Old Man brought up a knee to catch Ezra's abdomen. In his other hand the Old Man had a fat piece of kindling that he was taking home to chop up into splinters to start his fires. There had been an untimely coolness the last few days. With this piece of kindling the Old Man lammed Ezra a couple of terrific blows on the buttocks and then gave that puny man a swift shove that sent him flying out of the alley-mouth, bent double, all the way across the secluded street.

The children were dizzy and dazed by the swiftness of these events. "Come on in to supper," snapped the Old Man in a dangerous mood, in no mood for argument. He turned his back on them and entered the gateway. They came trotting along excitedly, whispering torrents of admiration and horror of the Old Man's prowess, wondering about further adventures of the frustrated Ezra. They would always wonder about Ezra.

And from that time on, the spell on Ethel was broken, thrown wide open, and the beauty escaped. The feeble-witted man she had seen, the shabby scarecrow, was not the hero she had imagined, and she felt a deep keening and remorse. Oh, what would she do?

The Roll-Call

Poor Ethel!

Now let us withdraw for awhile from the immediate vicinity for a grand view of the situation in which we leave them, beginners in the school of society at large. We will find them hereafter "finding themselves" (just what this arduous pursuit of themselves is, we shall see).

We have said that home is the familiar situation that we occupy. Exactly what Ethel, Mutt, and Hilliard knew as their home only they themselves could possibly have said, and they were too inarticulate ever to divulge their own unique enigmas.

Only this generalization is certain: each new perception came to them with the strength of an issue, gripping them and bruising their senses until they recognized it. These first perceptions would, in abbreviated and modified forms, linger throughout their lifetimes.

For example, the children early became class-conscious. Each town and city has its subtle hierarchies, as you know if you have traveled, and if you have not traveled, travel is imperative.

This class consciousness was first felt by the children as a neighborhood consciousness. They identified themselves with the neighborhood in which they found themselves. They knew what house belonged to each climbable tree and who lived in each house. They learned who among their neighbors was shrewd and argumentative, who grouchy and meanminded and soft. This home of theirs was no longer the small

house and backyard, but the neighborhood, and was growing more immense all the time. A whale of a home.

Tupelo was composed of approximately 2800 worlds. The hierarchy Tupelo was psychologically divided into was as follows:

The Old Wealthy families, the aristocrats, whose lines began with petty merchants marrying Irish and German immigrants, or something such, and who had been considerably impoverished since the days of greater hustlebustle and industry — the old cottonport days. Their children were those rare darlings, like Cato Foreman IV, who was more girl than boy, and Valentina Spooner, who was a tomboyish little hellion, and Timothy Moss, the old doctor's son, who was so afraid of women (his mother had a voice like a man's) that he even refused to sit next to girls at school. Their houses were the old immense wooden castles, all the rage in 1880, whose rooms were more likely than not patterned on cathedral naves and other romantic architecture, and which were the dickens to heat in the wintertime. The bridge cult stemmed from the aristocracy, and the hues of antiquity gave everything they did a stunning elegant polish slavishly imitated.

The usurpers, the new moneyed set, were the social rivals of the bluebloods. The old families, the Foremans and Spooners and Mosses and Mitshers, who had made their fortunes back in their first and second generations through the powerlust and miserly characters of some old diehard individuals of the old New World, and who were still existing precariously

on those fortunes and the old diets, seemed to be dying out. The old families were generally fourth and fifth and sixth generation, and were kin to those society folk whose goings-on waste so much space in New York and Boston papers, the gaudy insects. They were the country cousins. The new successful businessmen and their families, the sassy set, who had perhaps come to Tupelo as varmints, were generally of second and third generations, sometimes of first and fourth. Their offspring were the smart-alecks, the pace-setters, who whizzed around at an early age at the wheels of creampuff and fire-engine-red roadsters and drank liquors as soon as they were kneehigh to a mosquito and possessed marvelous vocabularies on sex. They seemed to fear no one, and they seemed to be having a rowdy good time most of the time. Because they were moneyed and powerful, the sheriff never did more than bat an eye at their loud and frequent disturbances of the peace, and money seemed to excuse their vagrancy in the eyes even of respectable folk. A taint appearing among them here and there was a selfishness, a thoughtlessness, an exhibitionism and narcissism, quite irritating. It seemed born of security. The children often needed to have their noses rubbed in the dirt.

Next came the moderates, the artisans and hard-workers, usually solid, practical, and (as if to balance their practicality) religious people. They subscribed largely to traditional gentility. The Old Man was of their breed. To them life was a serious proposition. Their feuds were of a more vehement type.

They sometimes shot at one another to relieve their frustrated feelings. They were constantly at war with their own inhibitions. Their children were the confused ones, wanting to lead, but having to submit by their own coercions to being led. They knew life as very different from (and a more savage propensity than) what the beforenamed children knew.

In Ethel and Mutt and Hilliard daydreams took the cultural delineations they perceived in children of the "aristocracy," the elegance of demeanor, the choice vocabularies. But they envied the new-moneyed set their free-wagging tongues and abilities to adventure.

Then in rapid succession came the poor whites, and the very poor whites, the varmints. These were the remainder of the multitude, and they were probably the more obvious, seeming by their activity to be the numerical majority. They were the Holy Rollers, fanatics and cowards, sinners and sinless, complainers and shouters of joy. The vagrants seemed to enjoy a vigorous interest in life. So often the vagrant children were precocious mentally, sexually, spiritually. These human termites, these town parasites, were on view in any public place. They built their little shacks beside the highways so that they might watch life ride by in automobiles. You could see the bare walls through the doorless doorways as you drove past, the bedticking and old magazines carpeting the floors. Through shadeless and screenless windows you could watch couples make love, if you were curious. The children seemed to be born in litters. They were always ragamuffins, towheaded

and pale and filthy. Their little trousers so frequently bagged with excrement as they played, their hefty mothers content to let them bag so. These were the children with whom no "nice" child would play. These were the "sorry" (unapproved) children. And witnessing their swelling numerical superiority, one would think they were the future United States of America, the young nation to be.

After the very poor whites, or perhaps along with them in the eyes of more respectable white men, came the more cultured negroes, the educated negroes. They were most hated of the negroes by less-cultured and less-educated whites, to whom the recognized culture smacked of tyranny anyway. To any quietly decent white people, like the Old Man in his literal translation of religious principles, friendship for these decent dark people came easily, came strong. Such a friendship was based on true respect for individuals. It was the harmony of reasonable men.

But the issue is fought by savages, both black and white, apparently self-helpless. You remember the old battlecry: "I'd ruther be a nigger than pore white trash." Well, the quiet decent reasonable negroes frequently found themselves being made to answer for all those imaginary sins affixed to men of their hues. They were constantly treated by white people with surliness and insult. Because they exuded a careful dignity, which seemed synonymous with dread superiority, racial fanatics made their mightiest efforts to humble them, it seemed, to *make* them inferior. These frustrated white people jeered: "I

wouldn't call one of them niggers Mister if the President of the United States got down on his knees and begged me to as a personal favor to him." Eleanor Roosevelt, "nigger-lover," was cordially detested by most Tupelo men and women. "It don't pay to coddle niggers." These schoolteachers and preachers, the colored gentry, these spokesmen of the "Yes indeed, Sir," "Quite right, Madam," and "Excuse me, please," kind were far more hated than the ignorant savage "turpentine niggers," who so constantly cut one another's throats with razors. They were considered to be "aping" the white people, "them black apes," and this plagiarism was found fit for sober round condemnation and spitting by their white brothers. Their children were far too elegant and "smart" to escape this condemnation.

Next came the negroes in business for themselves. The storekeepers on "Nigger Hill," the jukebox owners, the whorehouse madams, the taxicab owners, etc., etc. Because of their quietly growing power, they were the common hatred of all the whites. Because these negroes were improving their economic status, the white people, who did not seem to be improving theirs much, were disgruntled. However, as long as it was quietly done, almost invisibly done, it was all right. It was when these novel businessmen began "putting on the dog" that it seemed insufferable. There were white racial fanatics who could not bear to see a negro girl in a first-hand wellcut dress, who jeered at the beautiful colors the negroes wore with such fresh unspoiled art. (So many culture-

oppressed people have learned that dowdiness is stylish, at the same time knowing that clothes-consciousness is an integral part of social-consciousness. You have seen the absurd pretentious women who do not understand simplicity.) A terrible symptom of these negroes' new independence was that their children often seemed belligerent.

Then came the negro laborers and servant negroes, the Uncle Tom negroes and beggars, all generally hated and feared by the more intelligent members of their own race. Even from the aristocratic white man's point of view the servant negroes were the repulsive negroes, sanctioned by that very repulsiveness, were negroes any white man should wipe his feet upon, and yet, because these negroes submitted (were "umbul"), they were "good." A "true" Southern white woman, so sublimely proud in her racial "purity," would as soon be raped as submit to an enforced slavery like that of her negro "mammy" washwoman. The children were the pickaninnies, those pitiful underfed and peabrained mortals who might smile and play in cunning fashion much as kittens do, but whose futures depended upon their being in a suitable state of childishness and servility, on their remaining underfed or fed on foods that might insure the inferiority of their glands. They were the human mules and donkeys. Hope must never be kindled in them, or Southern women will be forced to do their own washing and Southern men their own undignified manual labor. Thank goodness these negroes are in such preponderance, so the Swedes and Germans and Russians

can better understand the Republic, what it stands for. All this will weigh in the scales.

So there you have a crude sketch of the social hierarchy of that small human hive, Tupelo, and as much as Korzybski-intoxicated young intellectuals may wince at the crude hacking manner of this sketch, it is fairly true. It is difficult to read about the oppressed peoples in history and to realize that we are living history now. Men who can sometimes divorce themselves from the stink of the present may see crushing ironies.

Even mildmannered artists who put their emotions in music or paintings can be exceedingly dangerous individuals.

To Ethel and Mutt and Hilliard the world seemed to be truly a dangerous place to live. Mutt seemed to enjoy the danger in the air. Ethel sensed it with morbid timidity. Hilliard sensed danger with internal anguish and an external show of valiance.

But to these children, with their little amorphous personalities, the world was always filled with great promises, and they sought the bliss of ambiguous excitements almost indiscriminately. It was *wonderful* to anger. It was *wonderful* to feel bursting with the righteousness and importance that emotional intensity made them feel. It was *wonderful* to war. It was even more wonderful to feel great awe and fear.

The quiet little emotions of pity and tenderness and patient cheerfulness seemed O, so dull and unimaginative and uninspired.

Ethel and Mutt and Hilliard each knew, as a child, a respect for all people, indiscriminately.

Gradually, through the various experiences of listening to the conversations of the Old Man and the Old Woman and of having personal dealings with certain people, they learned whom and whom not to respect.

They learned whom to like and whom to dislike.

They learned what was righteous and what was evil.

They learned to have delusions of persecution and imaginary enemies. They learned to be little demons of self-righteousness and aggressive snobs.

They learned to wound and to confuse and to lie to themselves.

They learned to envy and to despise and to be on the side of the strong.

They learned to obey better than they had learned to decide for themselves.

They learned to find solace in amusements that could not wound them.

They learned to be innocuous and to have innocuous thoughts. They learned to subdue themselves, to watch their own speech.

They learned that honesty is not always the best policy, that Christianity was peculiar to Sundays, and that the silence of stones is the beautiful music.

They learned how to think and how to unthink.

They were always learning something.

3
Ceaseless Transitions
Bear Moment Fruits

The Foreman of His Crew

The South and Tupelo did not understand what was happening in the North. They saw pictures of a bruin John L. Lewis, and nobody liked him but those who had reasons and those who knew him only by his pictures and anonymous reports of lawless labor unions. Well, now what would *you* think? So much of industry in the heart of the South was an amorphous mass of conjecture that the people of the South were hardly aware of what existed on the tips of their noses. Perhaps they were cross-eyed (cross-thoughted). Hush-hush covered the behind-the-scenes transactions, and ignorance everywhere hung like a pall. Sometimes an outcry was heard before it was stifled: "What's happening to us?" And there were the same old pessimists spitting and remarking: "Country's goin' ta the dogs."

The belligerent shouts of the newspaperboy in Southern cities were Annunciations in the wilderness. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the Moses in the

White House whom people of the South and Tupelo prayed would lead them out of their self-imposed bondage and into the Promised Land. The New Deal was startling, but the people wanted startling results. The Solid South kept ever the little white donkey enshrined. And they went to work on the P. W. A.

The Old Man rose at five to go to work at five-thirty. He left the house by the light of the stars and moved softly through the deserted streets toward town, where he could catch the truck and ride forty miles to Custanooga. At Custanooga, by courtesy of the U. S. Government and the taxpayers and a national debt soaring into the stratosphere, men were building a bridge across the Custanooga River.

The Old Man, being an out-of-towner, was having trouble getting men to work on his crew. Custanooga men let it be known with impudent jeers and slipshod work and reluctance to his command that they resented his presence.

The Old Man did not spout off or weep with rage, boil as he might inwardly. With great outward calm and forbearance he went on with his plans, spoke to the upper hierarchy of bosses and told them what he would do. Then he went back to Tupelo one nightfall with a new mission. He dug up men whose work he knew, men whom he had known so long that he could handle them with a minimum of psychological output. He had him a new crew, a crew as tough as any of the Custanooga thugs, for the Old Man knew tough men.

The Monday he finally had his crew fully assembled, the Old Man woke with a new keen edge to his

mind. The nearer he drove to success, the finer and more definite grew his effort. He was obsessed with the urgency and delicacy of these operations. He barely spoke to the Old Woman, just kind of hummed as he waited for his coffee to percolate, and grabbed up his little thermos jug and the sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, his lunch, and slung his old tough torso out of his little white house as if he were on his way to a meeting with God.

He might have paused a moment on the back stoop. Above the still little perfect figure of the avocado-pear tree the moon hovered in a geometrically precise attitude. The still small round-all-over-like-a-ball luminosity, so infinitely nearer than the stars. The craters were totally invisible. Only a perfect cold brilliance streamed steadily. A classical scene, like a beautiful stilted language.

Perhaps you are not one who takes pleasure in the wonders of the physical universe. Well, the Old Man did. He probably bowed his head a moment in homage to the wondrous power that created so much grandeur. The Old Man was that kind of man.

Then he went on toward his rendezvous with his crew. He found that the first truck had been filled and gone about fifteen minutes. "Thought they'd go on over and wait for you there, Skipper," the remaining driver sang out, violating the beauty of the silences with his big ugly juicy voice. "All right," said the Old Man a little disappointed, a little peeved. He climbed into the seat alongside the man; they waited about ten minutes for stragglers, and finally

shoved off into the night, jouncing over rough patched asphalt. Pre-dawn stealth of light already made slightly visible outlines of foliage beside the road. "Florida roads ain't much better than cow-tracks," grouched the Old Man a little unjustly.

The Old Man found himself thinking of Europe during the meandering of his imagination. Many people find it difficult to realize Africa, Eurasia. To look at a globe is to them much the same as looking at a blank slip of paper. They see that it is paper, and blank paper, and paper of good or bad quality. But they can not think in terms of people. If the Old Man had one solid trait to his thinking it was the ability to remember that the planet was small enough and that men lived close to the earth.

The Old Man enjoyed his skepticism about new fads such as vitamins and talk about a world so luxurious that people would do no work in it (this talk in the midst of the Depression) but sit around and play bridge and relax themselves day in and day out. The Old Man had lived long enough in his world to be accustomed to feeling responsibility for his world, and this morning he felt a vague desire to know what was going on in Europe. If he had had a radio he might have been able to keep a better tap on immediate events. He didn't have many extravagances. "I'm going to get me a radio," he murmured aloud. "Aye?" shouted the rough and ready driver. The Old Man grunted discouragingly, resenting this sudden intrusion on his private life. What did that durn fool Oscar Bell know about Russia and Spain and the crying need of war's children and the Hindus?

Nothing, the Old Man thought a little savagely. Some people never want to improve themselves.

When the Old Man reached the shed beside the river at Custanooga, he found his raucous nephew Pete sitting on a log viewing the situation with his usual profane eyes. Pete had gone overseas in 1918 at the tender age of sixteen, having lied loud and long about his age, among other things. War has had, in the past, a way with the children of men, has waved an enticing finger of lawlessness and glory.

Dingy Nelson had found a splinter of cedar lying on the earth where someone had dropped it. He kept running his fingers over it, smelling it, playing with it. "You know," he said after a long pause, "I'd like my throne made out of cedar." There was another pause. Came a soft profane murmur from Pete's vicinity: "I'd make you a throne out of Spanish bayonets if I could get you to sit on it." Dingy Nelson sat smug in a kind of dreamy satisfaction with his world for about a full minute before the meaning of those soft caressing words soaked in. Then he started with a yell and seized the wily Pete by the collar and made as if to choke him to death. Pete just silently laughed, a mouthful of yellow tobacco-stained teeth.

The Old Man had no time to enjoy foolishness. He set off down the plank walk that led to the door of the shed. It was daylight now. Pink and gold clouds, like Hollywood frivolity, Zeigfeldwise, displayed the radiance of the East. There was a naked little droplight spreading its yellow hue through the office.

The Old Man walked in with his usual aplomb. "Well, I got 'em," he announced.

"Good," said Mr. Speed, looking up from his littered desk. "That's fine. You're all ready to go now?"

"Yeah," announced the Old Man, "except for just a few small matters." There was unusual belligerency in this last pronouncement.

Young Mr. Speed cocked his Harvard-tuned ears. "What's that?" he shot back.

Said the Old Man with fierce quiet emphasis on each word, his hand now and then giving a quiet thump of emphasis on the top of the desk: "Me and my men are here to work on this bridge. Custanooga men ain't as holy as they could be wanted. My men are a rough lot of cusses, but they ain't looken' for trouble. The first one of them men what gets hurt, I'm warning anybody, there's gonna be hell to pay, and I ain't gonna be able to stop any of it, and I don't know as I would try to."

A quiet steely glint of approbation came into young Mr. Speed's eye. Custanooga men Briggs and Martin heard, and their ears burned. A couple of men lingering around outside waiting for a line-up heard, and they were sure to discuss it with their straw-bosses. All right then. That's the way things stood with the Old Man from Tupelo. Okay.

Well, the Old Man left the office and went to the shed where he and his men kept their toolboxes. There he found one of his men, little Johnny Nelson, soupily drunk. Alf Henderson was trying to sober the little man up. The Old Man didn't waste any

time with him. "All right, Johnny," he said, "you go lay down out there in that scrub oak until you get over it." Then the Old Man unlocked his tool-chest.

"No," said the liltingly argumentative Johnny, "I ain' agoin' out there."

"If you don't go on I'm goin' to carry you out there personally," said the Old Man calmly, but Johnny was incapable of remembering just what a powerhouse the Old Man was. "Fact is," murmured the Old Man in a vexed undertone to Henderson, who stood by with his hands on his hips, in a quandary, "Fact is," said the Old Man as he picked up a handful of tools, "I didn't want to bring him along noway."

"Yeah," said Henderson disgustedly, "if it warn't for Dingy I don't know what would happen to this little fool. I noticed on the truck this morning that he was mighty quiet in that corner. It was too dark to see. I reckon he was guzzling."

The last part of this speech seemed to affect Johnny mightily, though it is to be doubted that he understood a word. He seemed to postulate his own thoughts into the speech of the others. "Come and get me," he began to rant. "Come and get me — "

"If you don't shut up, Johnny," said the Old Man angrily, but deliberately, "I'm gonna slap you down."

"Hit me," came back the enraged reply. "Hit me. Go on. Hit me."

Johnny was sitting on the little grip in which he kept his tools. His face was twitching with tweaks of vehemence, and sporadically a tear would roll out

of his eyes, his weak blinking little eyes. He was sweating profusely, had no complete control over his senses. If he had been at a party the little spectacle he made would have contributed to the fellowship and the gayety. But here, early in the morning and on the jobsite, it was monstrously out of place.

The Old Man made no reply, and this seemed to Johnny to add insult to injury. "I'm gonna make you hit me, then," he said, and when the Old Man turned around to look at him in askance, there was the little man plundering through his grip (he had his tools in an old grip). He straightened up, breathing wheezingly in satisfaction. The Old Man heard him whisper, "Now. There. Now I got it," and when Johnny turned around there was a big silent glinting pistol in his hand. "I said I was going to make you," said Johnny tersely.

If the Old Man had run he might have got shot, sure enough. But the Old Man knew. He leapt suddenly, like a cat, and caught Johnny by the wrist in a steely grip that withered the flesh and squeezed it to the bone. With a spastic gesture Johnny's hand flew open and dropped the gun. Quick as a cat, the Old Man picked up the gun. "Here, Alf," he said, never taking his eyes off the dazed and faltering Johnny, "put this in your toolbox."

"I ain't gonna put that in my toolbox," Henderson refused flatly.

Johnny sat down on the floor beside his sprawling grip, and he began to sob, his head in his arms and his arms wreathing the tops of his bended knees. "I'm agonna get the sheriff," he blubbered.

"All right," said the Old Man with perfect composure, though inside him he hurt, "get the sheriff and I'll give him the gun." Then the Old Man stepped outside and left the shed until noon, when he came back to get another tool and found Johnny on his back snoring, his mouth an open hole, his arm thrown across his eyes. The Old Man kicked the empty bottle into a corner, and heaved a mighty sigh.

Maturation

The bridge grew clamorously, inch by inch, day by day, the spans reaching out toward each other. Would the ends meet? Strange harmonies were heard, men working with men, and harsh grating discord. Half the time the Old Man's jawline was thrust out taut, and the communication was grim. His curses were soft and mild, but they conveyed more steely strength than ever did Pete's raucous cusses. "Well, now, by golly," the Old Man would drawl softly, and if you were close by your flesh would crawl.

Soft and mild is the characteristic speech of the South. Sweet-talking negro women commit murder with razor blades. A gentle dear old man leads a posse. The merchants idle away time with soft flattering speeches, and if you listen you will probably become congenial enough to buy their wares. Soft-soap is practiced until it is a fine art in the South. And the dirtiest slurs, the most uncouth words, are like angel honey. "Honey," says the scornful whore, "I wouldn't be seen in your shoes if Gawd came to

me and begged me, promised he'd make me a saint. You may be a good woman, but you ain't got a pint of clothes sense." The "good" woman flushes, starts to speak, breaks, and walks on. There are tears of anger in her eyes. She is not able to find words capable of stinging as she has been stung. Why? She has not the honeyed tongue. Ah, many a wily rogue beguiles with honeyed tongue, provokes fond smiles. Ho hum.

Also common to an astonishing degree, in a country of such stingy minds, is the laughter. Because the South is so poor, and the people show it, laughter is almost as necessary an item as medicine. Laughter is the evaporation of tensions, of worry. Sorrow weighs a ton in the viscera, feels like a thick lump of glue pendulous from the diaphragm, and each internal organ strains and dangles with doubled weight. Whereas in hilarity there is a dizzy lightness, intoxication, as if all the inner occupants had set to dancing and wild capers, playing pranks on the brain, and the blood is bubbly as if the air pressure were growing thin.

When you feel that all the world is jolly, when every tiny or enormous event seems droll, then you are fit for human companionship. This peculiar form of stupidity is the most prominent of the social graces. We have come to expect theater of one another, and he who is without theatrical artistry does not remain in our thoughts for long. It is something children often must learn through years of pain and suffering: that it is necessary to be thus stupid.

Mutt seemed to possess this knowledge to a high

degree. The other children, not so much. They were dubious where Mutt was tickled pink. The Old Woman's laughter was hard to understand, was more a rite of physical absolution than an intellectual pastime. It was the Old Man whose wit was especially entertaining. At the supper table the Old Man, if the spirit moved him, might issue in perfect succession and timing a series of puns whose impudence and skulduggery were perfectly delightful to the children, who worshipped him besides.

Because he was an old man, it was difficult to get things through his nozzle, he said, at which the children laughed uproariously because of the way he cocked his head. Because he had fit in the Spanish American War, he had had a little experience in such affairs, and he — he wouldn't bet on it of course, as he wasn't a betting man, but — had reasons to believe that no nation in the world was going to think too seriously about declaring war on the United States in the near future. (Little Hilliard had come to him with his chin twisting and his brave little face red and wet with tears to ask the Old Man if Europe was going to go to war against the United States as Mutt that afternoon had thought Europe might.)

The Old Man put his elbows solidly on the table, and one finger absently rubbed his eye as he spoke his slow prodigious words.

"No," said the Old Man, with a heavy sigh, "I don't think any country in Europe, or anywhere else right now, might go to war with us. Of course, later on they might. I don't say they mightn't later. But the way it looks. Anyway, Europe ain't never going

to war against anybody. Europe is just the name for a continent, and that continent is made up of some of the most addled and cantankerous little countries you ever heered of. Most ain't no bigger than Texas, and some of them are a good deal smaller. No, I don't think any one of them countries is contemplatin' war agin the United States. Right now they remember the last war a little too well," he added soberly. Then the Old Man chewed his thumb for a moment frowningly, as if he had said an unwise unpremeditated thing.

"Reminds me of a story I once heard," he said softly, slowly, "about Mike, the Irishman. Mike saw a bull out in the fields. Mike got tickled when he got to thinking" (here the Old Man began to ladle his own version of Irish brogue, delightful delicate nuances of sheer music — he had a sweet soft old tenor), " 'Now, wudun't it be having tha gurrrandes' toime to be taking tha critchure by tha horns ahnd th-rube-ing his nose in tha mud.' And Mike he sat down and he laughed and laughed, just to think about that thing, and he almost kilt hisself laughing. Well, the thing just took him over, and presently he went out and grabbed the bull by the horns. A little while later Mike said, 'Begorra ahnd it's a foine thing Oi laughed beforrre Oi cum out.' "

Mutt had found it necessary to fall out of his seat and lie down on the diningroom floor to release all the howling laughter that welled up in him. His stomach hurt, and tears rolled down his cheeks as he stilled the final convulsions of giggles. How Mutt did love a joke, an opportunity to squeal and squirm.

Then Hilliard might pipe up with a delicate request for an old favorite. "Granddaddy, tell us about that time you was playin' ball."

"You mean the time I was — " and the Old Man was launched.

The Old Man liked to get the baseball scores along with the six o'clock news. Baseball was home territory to the Old Man. He didn't care "nothin' " about football, which seemed a barbaric senseless kind of sport to him. It disgusted him, big boys mauling each other, hurling themselves like steers, all beef and no brains. (The Old Man had always been a little electric fellow, all impulsive grace and untrained elegance.) Even baseball seemed kind of degenerate today. Baseball had been a different game in his youth, he said.

He recalled days when teams were composed of townsmen volunteers, and township played township. He recalled those specific days when the sky, deep as a diamond, presided over a different kind of diamond, and he was "in a way" the star of his team.

"Take that day when Tupelo was playing Geranium. Geranium was full of thugs, Geranium had a tough team to beat."

O, he remembered — "I remember," said the Old Man, "I was battin' against Thermus Tully. Now Tull was about as good a pitcher as ever was born. He could pitch a ball around a corner, up a fire escape, down a chimney, most anywheres he wanted it.

"Well, I wasn't none too feeble that day myself. Fact is, I was hustlin'. The Geranium manager, that

was old Bill Davis, old Bill, he'd told old Tull to watch out for me, and I could see by the way Tull looked me over that he had it in for me.

"I could hear old Dave Shirley in the bleachers whoopin' 'er up. They said, I never heard it, but they said while a ball game was going on, you could hear old Dave cuttin' up clear across the town. He died not long after," reminisced the Old Man.

"Well, I could hear old Dave Shirley spuming, fuming, 'Atta boy, Pug, don't let this pirate get in yer hair!'

"They called me Pug in those days, some of the boys. I had tuh lick a couple of fellows one day," added the Old Man, a bit sentimentally. O, those were the good old days! "They wuss getting a little too liberal with their nicknaming in front of my girl." And he looked at the Old Woman. She had been his girl.

"But, I'm getting away from my story," he added briskly, and stepped up his pace a little.

"Well, when I heered Old Dave Shirley singing like that in the bleachers I just kinda smiled to myself. I had a presentiment, or whatever it is you call it, that I was gonna hit that ball, and hit it hard.

"I let two balls get by me. I kinda figured I'd take it easy, but on the third I kinda tensed up." Here the Old Man made some peculiar motions with his shoulders, flopping them to and fro as if they had been wings and he was toning them up, though just what *was* intended was a moot question.

"I just held up a couple of fingers, to let the bright

boys be on the lookout — that was the signal for the man on second to keep out of my way, and then the ball come and I hit it.

"I mean I *hit* it.

"It went ducking out to the outfield as purty as anything you ever seed.

"Everybody was wailing to beat the band, screaming and cutting up, the umpire's eye was following that ball, he was squintin', and that ball shone fierce in the sun and dropped leisurely like over toward the two men standin' there —

"I said o-hoh, I thought I seen what was going to happen, so I just didn't go to first base at all, just galloped on out to second.

"Lo, and behold, by the time they picked up the ball I was sittin' on the bag, a-pickin' my teeth, and nobody seen me get out there.

"What happened was that the two men out in the field was each thinking that the other was going to git it, and it came and they just stood there and let it fall right between them."

The children heard the eloquent plop.

The Old Man had been wallowing in the luxury of that moment, which had happened almost fifty years before. Whether he had loped, as he said, or sped out to second was not going to be damaging uncertainty in his story, for the story told too admirably well this way.

Now his little sapphire eyes began to lose their Holy Grail-like gleam, and he came back to earth and the exasperating present.

Mutt had to speak up, the droll little assassin, with a demonic impudence in his demeanor. "Weren't you the one they called Rubberlegs?" he said.

The Old Man was secretly highly flattered by this testimony to his fame, but he tried hard not to show it. "Boy," he said severely, "what fool told you that?"

Mutt grinned with an ecstatic air. How he liked to be the center of attention like this. He knew he held a trump. "I got private informers," he boasted.

The Old Man pretended to ignore him, spoke to the world at large, all the time seeming calmly intent on ladling out some blackeyed peas onto his plate, but there was a gleam of delight hidden beneath the lids of his eyes. "What most young smartypants need most is t'live a little while longer, t'develop the proper weaknesses, and t'subdue the improper strinths."

The Old Man liked *Alley Oop* in the funnypapers. Mutt loved *Moon Mullins* and the *Katzenjammer Kids*. Ethel liked *Little Annie Rooney* and the sexy adventure strips most. The Old Woman liked *Little Orphan Annie,* and Hilliard simply wallowed in *Buck Rogers, Tarzan,* and *Terry and the Pirates.* The children thought the funnypapers were, in general, all so true. Life was like that, somewhere out there. The children were not so fond of *Polly and Her Pals, Out Our Way, Mr. and Mrs.* They were somehow trite and unreal. *Gasoline Alley, Tillie the Toiler, Andy Gump, Toots and Caspar* — they were a bit more real. But *The Nebbs* and *The Bungles*

were mighty sterile. Too real to be real. Anyway, funnypapers were "grand" entertainment.

Mutt tried to imitate the radio comedians, Amos 'n' Andy, Lum and Abner, and others that the Old Man picked up on his shiny new radio. The Old Man found that these programs relaxed him at night; their snail's pace made him sleepy, and he could rise straightway afterwards and tumble off to bed.

Mutt wanted to be a wit more than anything. He memorized the slang and catchwords, as well as the words to popular songs of the day. Being only a grammarschool boy, he naturally had his heroes among the high school boys. His heroes were, namely, Slug Davis and Dinky Clark, the heroes of the football team.

They treated him like a puppy, called him their mascot, fed him ice cream cones, and gave him playful workouts.

Did you know that if a large person gets a good handhold on your small neck you become, according to the pressure of the hold, increasingly helpless? Mutt learned this inspired knowledge right quickly.

He followed at their heels worshipfully. He found their parleys so enviable. Little glissando remarks made with such heroic ease and nonchalance. Lightning flights of fancy, like putting baseball bats atop schooldoors so that when one went to open the door the baseball bat fell on one's head, ha-ha-ha, and caused all kinds of fun and lumpy bumps, a hilarious moment. Their talk was a kind of local and private doubletalk, logic gone hogwild. It was art, all right. To Mutt's immense satisfaction he found that when

he used this talk on his sister or others not initiated into its clever obscurity, they were totally unable to understand him.

He liked to flap his lips like Donald Duck, sputtering "wack wack wack" and running wildly, wobbly, as if possessed by an urgent thought.

Another of his glittering little catch sayings was, "You maka me sick." And yet another was, "I'll knock a hickey on you." The Old Woman repeatedly admonished him that such talk wasn't "nice."

He and his Grandma had little tilts over his affirmative responses, his belching "yeahs."

"You say 'yes ma'am' to me," she raged, blipping him softly on the cheek (she was incapable of a stinging slap). "You hear me?"

"Yeah," cried Mutt as he went out, disgruntled.

He wouldn't have missed a Saturday night movie for a million dollars. It was a form of intoxication. When the cowboy hero on the miracle-working white horse came rocketing down a steep slope in pursuit of the blackclad rustler, Mutt's squeals were among the highest and most piercing known to the theater.

(If you have ever stood in the lobby of a theater and listened to the audience you have read volumes on the nature of mankind. In the tone of darkness their inhibitions take leave of them. Children, small ones, have been known to "peepee" in the unbearable storms that descend on them from the screen to the subconscious marshaling of orchestral music [physical pressures of music]. Hums of interest, howls of lust, shrieks of laughter — all under influence of "the dope." In private, gum is smacked resound-

ingly and forgottenly to the incredible clicketyclicks of a tapdancer.

Listen to those squeals breaking like riots upon the air. Moans, sobs, uproarious laughter. The people are hynotized. They have lost their lucid self-possession, it seems as if forever. Almost anything can now be done with them.)

Mutt wanted so to be admired. He held exhibitions of his showmanship for the kids at home, doing most anything to strike fire from the flint of their imaginations, and the best he could achieve was a glowworm glow sometimes and a generally chilly dampness. Still he kept his dreams, in which he usually took the form of a fascinating clown.

Hilliard was still such a little runt. "Hey, Half-pint!" Mutt habitually hailed him. He was still Ethel's companion. Ethel read aloud to him from school-library books about the stars and the moon. He had a rhapsodic adoration of such things. The Old Man had brashly, and over the Old Woman's head, ordered a set of *Winston's Encyclopedia* from a traveling salesman, saying that it was for the children, but it was especially for the little runt. Every evening when the Old Man sat down with his newspaper there was little Hilliard, his voice like a pipsqueak, asking all manner of pious questions about what was this and what was that. Then the Old Man chuckled deep and tried to hide his chuckle in a cough, and sometimes could not resist drawing the little fellow up onto his lap. And then the Old Man, in simple irresistible words, would explain the "nooz" and help Hilliard to read some of it, too.

Thin soft little Hilliard, like a pin in his coveralls, his little head a delicate ball covered on top with silky fine hair. Ethel watched him and his granddaddy in silence without a blemish of jealousy. Ethel would never forget the hellishness of that scene when Ruby, weary of trying to pump them, tried to take her spite off on little Hilliard: "We're going to give you to the niggers." And later a tiny little blubbering gargoyle appealing to Ethel, his only savior in all that desolation. "But I'm a thweet boy, ain' I, Ethel? Ain' I a thweet boy?" Whenever she looked at Hilliard intently, a catch would come into her throat, and she wondered how well *he* remembered that soulsearing time.

There was another scene more recently added to her memory, etched with acid. Cousin Pete, who worked for Granddaddy, had recently acquired the habit of dropping around after suppertime to have a little talk.

All the children in the neighborhood at that time seemed to possess or have access to a Shetland pony. It was a fad.

Pete had carelessly promised to bring little Hilliard a Shetland pony. Now everytime Pete appeared in the gloom of deep dusk little Hilliard peered and peered in vain for the shape of a Shetland pony. Then as Pete sat beside the stove in the kitchen, bearing a strong pungent smell of underarm odor, as tantalizing as a polecat, little Hilliard would timidly inch his way forward enough to lisp — and Hilliard was tremendously shy — fearfully: "Did you, did you, did you bring me a pony?"

Pete would slowly rear back and turn his attention gravely to little Hilliard. "Son," he would say magnificently, "I'm watching fer one fer yuh." Then Pete would resume his conversation with the Old Man, and little Hilliard would stand there awkwardly, shifting his feet and gradually inching back toward the doorway (the eyes of the world were upon him, he thought) through which he would finally throw himself and rush pellmell into the bedroom and shut the door and lock it and crawl up under the bed to release the dammed flood of tears. A painful education, this.

Once Pete brought the Old Woman a dead pig. "I brung you a pig," he said airily.

Hilliard heard him from the next room, stood transfixed for a moment, rushed frenziedly into the kitchen. "O, did you bring me a pony?" he squeaked in stifled joy, danced with enormous jubilation.

"Nope, not this time," growled Pete, discomfited. Hilliard looked smashed. The end of the world. In a vehement whisper from the dishpans Ethel said, "I hate you." Pete looked at her, startled. Oh Lord, how she glared at Pete. Pete later told someone that that girl of Nora's was a spitfire. The natural and customary human revenge.

Ethel was an ugly little girl. There is an age of disproportion and ugliness, when features are out of focus and limbs are in confusion, when the puzzle has not been solved, the pieces put together.

Ethel was growing up. It could not be put off. She was due for those first tender "spiritual" loves which recur in adolescence and then disappear and rarely

come again, which are romantic in notion as the waves of the sea are wet. But because she feared it so, her love was a groveling shrinking kind of thing that throve best on ascetic dreams. Little twelve-year-old virgin, dreaming of a lover whose touch was like congealed moonlight, whose love was a rich sustained organtone. The butterflies in her belly were not fully understood by the little maiden. She thought it indecent to center her attention on her body, she tried to hide the swelling of her breasts. She lived in the world of psyche. She knew nothing of the physical invasion. She thought birth was a waking to find a baby by one's side. She was very nervous when she got near a boy those days, for fear that some bacteriological dust off the boy might kindle on the surfaces of her skin the mysterious smoke signals or whatever it was that brought the stork. She was even afraid to embrace Hilliard, for fear that in her unmarried state she might be embarrassed with a baby. She often wondered why unmarried girls did not have babies.

Then came the revolutionary concept brought about by the first menstruation bursting with violence upon her psyche. The Old Woman broke down by degrees and lamely told enough to frighten the girl almost out of her wits. This nastiness and bleeding, was that so related to love? Then love became a wound, wrought with pain instead of moonlight delight. She frequently burst into tears at the thought of the shameful way a man was supposed to use her.

A terrible thing happened in those physiologically revolutionary days, days of sexual bolshevism, to

Ethel. It was that she lived across the street from a schoolteacher who was raped. Old Lady Black's daughter, cross-eyed and sweet. Ethel could never forget the insinuation: that her body and her personality were not sacred. Now her hunger for the devotion of men, her infatuation with their virile gorgeousness, was blended with terror and suspicion. In this event a big buck negro committed the atrocity, was shot later on the beaches by a hasty thirteen-year-old youth, was thus saved from torture and lynching.

Meanwhile, despite herself, Ethel was being attracted first to one male and then another. Too ugly to attract them in reply to herself, she endured horrid frustrations. Because she was newly grown to the sixth grade, the first level in high school, she was taught by, among other teachers, a male teacher. And because she was in the throes of revolution, when every minute seemed like an eternity of education fraught with peril, anyone who seemed to have answers on the tip of his tongue for her seemed great, truly great. The stings of embryo thoughts goaded her toward the presumable emancipations of maturity.

And now, instead of responding as a child responds, vibrating as a whole with single impulsive response, she was beginning to sense with much new equipment new double and triple meanings where there had been but one.

Now it was plural thoughts, and sometimes she thought with a panicky yearning of the child she had been, somebody irretrievably dear to her, forever

lost to her, but a being — like a phantom — who would appear to her remotely and in formidable distances again and again.

She was beginning to foresee a prosaic and transitory quality to the days of the ordinary world. In watching married couples she was always shocked to see how spirituality had left the marriage, the spirituality with which the nuptials had surely been conceived. Then was the spiritual climax in life that first great romantic love affair in the late teens or early twenties? Did marriage murder that first incomparable and unspeakable beauty in the interests of a smug subsequent complacency, a dowdiness permanent in existence but void of passion?

Perhaps her first great love was that first male schoolteacher, whose growing abdominal paunch and pink balding head were beauty incarnate. She suffered alternate rapture and revulsion when she thought about him. His even white teeth, his bright merry brown eyes, his kindly quizzical face, even his querulous pout. She thought about him when she went to bed, and she could hardly wait to go to school in the morning, trembling with tender glory of love. He tossed his wisdom out in casual and exquisite accents. If he so much as glanced her way she paled and shuddered as if she were having a chill. If he asked her a question her stomach turned a flipflop, it seemed, and all her thoughts came tumbling down. He put a zero down beside her name almost every day for her classwork.

But it was never to be his wife or even his sweetheart that she yearned. She wanted to be his child.

She wanted him to be her father and to hold her forever in his heart, loving her with passion ethereal, but of greater spiritual quality than the sensual bedroom love. The more she saw of that kind of love, the more she suspected that it was always intimately accompanied by a mutual spiritual contempt. Besides, they simply must die of shame! Platonic love forever seemed the stronger.

No matter where she was or what she was doing, his image was on her eyes and in her heart. His warm real being. She would have died a "death in ecstasy" to be clasped to his breast.

She walked to town every afternoon, hoping that she would see him, or he her. He grew like a brand, stuck to her and burning her, and yet the torture was an excruciating sweetness. He was the embodiment of her undefined hopes, her soul, her all.

She was deadly serious.

(O, her? Of course he was flattered to death by the dark tense little girl's steady attention, but what was she thinking, he asked you? She had not one grain of sense, not one iota or inkling of what the lesson was about. She would surely fail English this year. Teaching was a hopeless thankless task.)

An Introduction to God

When the Old Man got home these days, darkness had grown up like a thicket. He went nowhere, but listened to his radio. Yet there was a craving in him to sense some beauty, not wholly auditory as in the case of the radio.

The Old Woman was naturally more pious than he, her life was so much more confining and introverted. She wanted the children to ponder the prodigies of clean living now, when they were young enough to be more easily influenced. She wanted the children to have Baptist Sunday School training. (There were so many churches in town the children might be confused as to which religion was best, so the Old Woman made the choice. She was sure of it.)

At that time the pastor was a whitehaired black-browed rascally man of God named Tooney, called Preacher Tooney. He was a nasty man, full of denunciations and plain and shocking speech about the way women dressed, and in ways he was a womanly man, so like the brotherhood of pastors, who are in general effeminate men. He prided himself on being anathema to "scary-cats." He hated cowardice worse than he did open opposition, he said. He used virile talk, but never mind, he was still in many ways like a woman. He was stern with little boys, delighted to take them into custody to wash out their mouths with soap whenever he caught them in a swear-word ("an ugly word"), and he walked around on tiptoe on purpose to catch them.

The Old Man declared that he intensely disliked the preacher's "guts," and that ended that matter right then and there. Also, the Old Man declared that as long as old Melvin Tingels sat in the front row with the light shining on him and as long as Suebelle Tingels ("that puss") sang in the choir, the Old Man was not going to put his foot inside that

church, Amen, not even if they "cut his head off and dragged his carcuss in feet first."

However, during the terrible heat wave in the summer of 1931, when people could not cook or eat or sleep (in beds like ovens), but walked the streets in their nightgowns and pajamas at night, seeking relief by creating air currents in the terrible brooding stillness of the air, well, the Old Woman got to wondering.

She had always heard that, just as the earth had been once "destroyed" by water, the next time it would be destroyed by fire. And she got to wondering if this was not a devious way of the Lord's to destroy the earth by fire. She talked it over with Mizziz Brown and Old Lady Black, and they agreed. Why, they had just been saying so.

Even after the terrific thunderstorm rose on Saturday and blazed away with a great display of six- and seven-pronged lightning (one vast white vein slithering across the sky to fork into many brilliant little veins) and the sound and fury of dynamite, uprooting great old oaks in whimsical tumult, breaking sycamore branches back until the pale flesh of the tree showed, even then as the earth cooled under the torrential din of rain, the fright lingered on in the Old Woman's mind. What if it had been the end of the world? You, Sinner, are you prepared? The Old Woman began to long for the security of the church.

In 1934 the Baptist church of Tupelo was so morally weary of that particular man of God that, just as ten years before they had given him a "call"

(had elected him pastor and handed over to him the pastorium — each Baptist church is supposedly a miniature "pure" democracy), they now voted him out of office. Of course it split the church into at least five factions, and he left with Cassandralike vehemence, calling out "Woe! Woe!" until even the staunchest expeller was a bit nervous.

It so happened that Tingels and Tingels' wife were of Preacher Tooney's faithful flock, and his ejection alienated them from the church, both tiffed and miffed.

After a suitable delay with much bickering, the church majority elected a sturdy young man named McClellan as pastor. And then the church majority washed the blood off their hands and retired, a few to return to the church every Sunday to be properly blessed and anointed and annoyed and scolded and shaken spiritually until their teeth rattled. This being done to their satisfaction, they went home to their dinners feeling quite purged and saintly. Some it made grumpily thoughtful, as if the sins of the world were too much to be borne. Others it left in a melting state of self-conscious sweetness, as if to say, I set you an example (some people are never wrong). Others went home worn out with listening, ate their dinners ferociously, and spent the afternoons dozing.

This new man was as male as a bullfrog, had a pretty wife and six children. He sang a ponderous bass, preached louder than his youngest could yell, and said quite plainly that he would give the Gospel out, but he wouldn't stand for any nonsense. You could take it or leave it. Then he contented himself

with preaching a good rousing belligerent and bloodcurdling sermon, never once mincing or wavering.

All this tickled the Old Man. He sat back happily glued to his seat and put his fingertips together, making a churchlike edifice with his hands. The Old Man had supposed that a preacher so male could only be found among the negroes, and here he was right there in the pulpit before him, in flesh and blood (and bulging chest and thighs thick as oak trees). It was incredible, but true.

There was a minimum of rites to the Baptist ceremonies, supposedly, though all that organizational foolishness kept crowding simplicity out, and the Old Man liked to sing the songs, so he came regularly and, furthermore, got on very friendly terms with the all-male preacher.

If the preacher could be said to have one outstanding trait, that trait was a passionate honesty. He never slandered personalities or even mentioned them save in kind terms when they were not in his presence, and he admitted they were human and subject to fatigue and ill temper and error of all possible kinds, but he was so barefaced about facts as he saw them in his neighborhoods — and, what's more, sometimes so stimulating — that people would have liked to tear him limb from limb. But that's beside the point.

As a matter of fact, this McClellan was an intelligent man, and being thoughtful about all experience he had, was somehow of a great spiritual wholeness. And he lived the meager life of a pastor with a kind of smiling sorrow and goodhumored patience that

cost him dear, but perhaps paid for itself after all. He was unloved by most of his pastorate because he refused to be a nursemaid, and he frequently drove his old Buick out into the countryside seeking relaxation and freedom from the pettiness he found everywhere. His wife dwelt in other ways, small selfish ways of righteousness, and she seldom understood his purposes, the things that made him tick.

When he had been a mere lad he had left the farm and the pigs and the chickens and the clay ruts and abused Southern countryside and run away to sea, working around the world on an old freighter, seeing more than his eyes could ever hold. And the more he saw the more he became aware that men could work for good by opposing the old traditional ways of evil, but that some men were needed to work for good through tradition. And tradition meant the church to him. He saw that men were men, and that some men were bound to be incapable where others thrived, and vice versa. He saw how puny was the human being, an odd assortment of nerves like wires that might snap at any minute and muscles and bone worked by pulleys — press a nerve-button, and marvels occur far beyond the marvels of the elevator. O, yes, he saw, and he saw the marvels that didn't occur, the failures, and he was moved less by disgust than by a powerful pity, and finally by compassion.

Unfortunately for him, a good many people like embroidery, prefer empty bustling around amid fuss and feathers, gaudy frivolity, to plain solid living. It is an actual fact. Sometimes the preacher won-

dered if his church was a church or a bawdyhouse, and the way a few of the female church members chased after him sometimes, it seemed that it was more the latter. He quietly and magnanimously dismissed the discomfort their amorous attentions caused him by understanding them with tolerant finality: there were some women who just couldn't help themselves, could not restrain their sex-consciousness, who were better openly lascivious than privately frustrated and insane. O, all the dreadnaught power of this unique man of God well nigh went to waste on the environment.

Well, to heck with other people's mealymouthed opinions, this was one preacher with whom the Old Man felt at home. As he joked with a group at the door of the church he put it this way: "After waging a forty year war with the female tribe," and he cocked his head roguishly, coughed to clear his throat, thrust his hands behind his back, "I find it a good feeling to come here on Sundays and listen to a *man.*"

"Now, Papa," warned the Old Woman quietly, chafed a little by his lack of dignity.

But it was the Old Man's way of joking. So few of these people knew how to talk to others outside their own small circles, so few had the vocabulary to do justice to the enormity of their times, that being damped by frustrated groping for expressive terms, they grew timid with their speech. The Old Man himself sometimes felt that lockjaw of the mind, especially when polysyllabic words came flashing into his mind with terrible hot brightness and even came running out on the tip of his tongue, and he found

himself too uncertain of their exact meanings or pronunciation to use them with reasonable security.

It was safe to remain in the shallows where their ordinary speech was bred and embraced. The age-old war between the sexes was old well-trodden ground, well understood by all. So the Old Man would content himself with variations on that theme or similar one. Now and then, even with such webby old material to work with, he managed a stroke of masterly execution, which filled his breast with singing and elevated his gizzard.

He was not the same man in church that he was on the jobsite. There he was a man of few words. In the church he was almost too garrulous.

Happily the Old Man took up again something he had almost forgotten: his Bible. The preacher knew his Gospel, and the Old Man studied hard, so that he might "trip that preacher up," or so the Old Man said. And the preacher flattered the Old Man with jokes from the pulpit about how he and the Old Man were feuding; they held mock arguments, clashes of wit in the vestibules. The Old Man became a Sunday School teacher, and he and the preacher held tourneys of bragging about their respective classes, trying to see which could tell the biggest "whopper."

(Don't turn away from this in disgust for the characters. They were only relaxing. The Old Man and the preacher could not remain in strenuous poses, in deep emotional fat, forever. If they relaxed in a crude fashion, it was because the elegant spits of esthetic dandies seemed weak and cheap and inappropriate to them. Yes, there will always be wars as

long as there are men to war. For all men, each of them, there are ways and means of living that they consider puky and ways that they hug to themselves.)

Said the preacher once, "My class don't need any shellacking. Why, their spirits are so choice that they can go right on singing psalms in the very midst of their slumbers. You watch 'em while I'm preaching."

Ejaculated the Old Man, "That's a whale of a one you just told!"

But when, at home in the evenings, the Old Man took his Bible and sat down unhurriedly to study it, there was no foolishness or goodhumored impudence in his manner, but a deadly seriousness and slow deliberation. To the Old Man the Bible was become indeed the bread and wine of life. He permitted himself gluttony with his Bible.

While the children went to the "moom-pitchures" or thrilled to the shocks of the radio, the Old Man sat alone in the quiet room or in the middle of the same room berserk with sound, and frowned and squinted as if he were sitting with preoccupied mental gymnastics on the curves of the moon. Now and then when the children got too rowdy his frown would visibly deepen, but he was getting a little hard of hearing anyway, he reassured himself, and old and useless besides. The children, well, the children, they needed their fun.

The Bible was again a constant revelation and delight. Its earthy tangs provided superb contrast to the holy fire that leapt here and there from the pages. He caressed its pages as he turned them: they were almost dented from the constancy and weight

of his eyesight. How frequently he felt like Job's twin brother, how frequently he slew his Goliaths and rebelled to his God like Jonah. As the Bible was an inspired book, so was he an inspired reader.

From the Old Man the children gleaned their reverent attitude toward the church. They imitated him, his quiet dignity as he read flowers into the dust. Yet the Old Man to them was synonymous with the church, and when they took their eyes off him the church itself suddenly was without religious meaning. It was a Sunday spectacle. The Baptist hymns were frumpishly jouncy, in a way, and the old loud piano could not inspire the raptures and awe a mighty organ might. The stained windows and the big bell in the steeple lent an air of difference, a note of pride. (Truly children are born of the devil; only spiritual maturity can reveal the true lay of God.) Instead of a church they usually saw a materialism and monotonous futility and blind smugness and hypocrites and — strange people. The music, shouted in hoarse tuneless and warbly voices, was vulgar, the bumblebee music of the vulgate. The people were poor, with flat opaque souls contrasting with their translucent meandering minds. It was difficult to see the dark spots in their souls for the absence of clear permanent light. Varmints. They were not idiots; they did not possess an idiotic transparency. Only another varmint could understand their murky systems of thought. In fact, they seldom tried thought, would have dropped it like a redhot bolt if they had thought that they were deeply thinking. Their lives were the sensual and the sensual-spiritual. They knew their

God with raw emotions, and He sufficed — they did not need thinking (so they thought). Do you not know that "God is love" and that all the thinking and even the good deeds in the world will not make your little human frame more conspicuous and luminous and appealing in His all-powerful sight? O, God kept a poor house, called it a church. Yes, the preacher was an impressive man, so virile, like a stevedore, and plainspoken as the common man is supposed to be. The thing that most distinguished the preacher from the greater body of his congregation in the eyes of the children was his seeming worldliness, and perhaps this impression was due chiefly to his greater vocabulary ranges.

McClellan did not spare himself. He had been one child in a family of thirteen, and somehow he had reacted to the overwhelming crowd of varmints with an odd mixture of defiance and humility, pig-headedness and tolerance, spirituality and factuality. He said plainly in the pulpit that the young people of the present day were lost to the church "unless some great catastrophe saves them. We have no hold on the young generations. The world the young people know today is so different morally and spiritually from the one we knew that God seems to have no place at all in their lives. And we have refused so completely to understand their worlds that they are continuously fighting us and, consequently, fighting our churches."

The Old Man's utter absorption in the Bible impressed the children greatly. It seemed that the waters of a brook never refreshed a weary traveler as

much as the Bible refreshed his mind. The children saw and wondered. Truly the Bible must be a divine book. Yes, in the powers of the Old Man's Bible they were quite ready to believe. But of anyone else's Bible — well, they just weren't sure.

A Farewell to Ezra

It was from a humble little brown woman who habitually sat in the last row with a fat little boy lying up in her lap fast asleep and sucking his thumb that the Old Man caught his next wind of Ezra. She lived out near Ezra's house, the children's old home, and one Wednesday night after prayer meeting, as she talked to the Old Woman about her labors that day, she suddenly grew perturbed, and an idea caught hold of her, so that she in turn grasped the Old Woman's arm and said: "Why yur Mister Munk's mother, ainchu? Ain he yur son?" The little humble woman trembled as if inspired.

"No," said the Old Woman gently and quietly. "He was my son-in-law."

"Ahhhh," said the little humble woman, nodding her head vehemently, and — surprising fact — said no more.

That night as they went to bed, the Old Woman told the Old Man about this significant little conversation, and after they had talked it over from all angles it was decided that the Old Man should ask the little humble woman what had happened to Ezra. That is, if he could ever "catch her" to herself.

It was exactly one week later that that very situation came to pass, and the Old Man carefully seized the opportunity. They were walking cruisingly down the block beyond the church together after a meeting. The Old Woman dropped to the rear of the little party, where the three children were strung out and bedeviling each other. The sky was a vast mountain, toward the summit of which the stars were soaring, a few lower ones bright like spangles, but the higher ones mere winks in the night. Indeed, some stars made faint and eerie clouds of light, like a luminous gas, while sporadically the glide of a shooting star made a faint tracery like a flower on a stem.

Little Hilliard was, naturally, the last straggler. He would have been content to stroll thus forever. He just couldn't keep his eyes off the sky. Whether it was day and the clouds were brilliant with light or it was night and utter darkness, to his rapt gaze the skies were pregnant with invisible glories, promise. He stumbled along, turning his ankle at frequent intervals, losing his balance as he stepped on a teetering stone, teeter-totter.

"Mizzez Nicholson," said the Old Man feelingly, "I wonder if yu'd answer a little question for me?"

"Lawks," said Mizzez Nicholson. "If the Lorud puts it within my powrrrs, I'm willin ta do enythin' as ull obleege eny rat [right] minded fokes. Ah ain' one ta ergue, but — "

(The Old Man had foreseen that this prologue might extend into the wee part of the night without his being a whit the wiser, so he saw fit to cough in a

very loud brusque and peremptory tone that brought the train of speech to a dwindling, dead, stop on the word "but.")

As if she were in a fever the little humble woman's face flushed as she paused, momentarily tonguetied. But she managed to untie her tongue and continue, after an awkward little silence during which the Old Man was preparing to launch his cross-examination and was all ready with the words "When did you last" on his lips. He never got to say the first word.

Jerkily the little humble woman resumed: "I rekkun yur uhwunderin' bout yur dotter-in-law. Thet is, yur son-in-law's wife, or the man who wuz yur son-in-law's wife. I mean, I mean — "

"Plague take you," thought the Old Man angrily, but he held his peace by the simple expedient of holding his tongue. The little humble woman began shifting the weight of her slumbrous little boy from one arm-crook to the other in a most amazing and compelling fashion, proof of her growing nervousness and frustration. He, the little incumbent, was suffering the rude jolts with a blank angelic countenance, unconscious and openmouthed. His little breath came and went with a small quiet steamy sharp sound, proof that he was alive. His thumb had tumbled out of his mouth and fallen, still wet and primed, toward the ground. If it had not been well-attached to his flabby little arm he might have lost it.

"Yeh," said the Old Man soothingly, kindly, and a little pitifully. The two participants in this odd conversation had come to the crossroads where they were

to part. The Old Woman was lingering a little ahead of them now, moving infinitesimally at a creep, but endeavoring to appear absent from this highly-charged duet. She didn't like to get "messed up" in such things. Yet she was very curious and eager to hear.

The three children trudged on homeward Indian file, living their separate little worlds.

"You knew about tha fat [fight], ah rekkun," said the little humble woman vaguely, looking all around her quite blindly, as if she thought she was to pull the words out of the air.

"Yeh. No," the Old Man quickly corrected himself. "What fight was that?" And he looked at her with old intent eyes, full of sight and insight, yet a little bleak as if inutterably weary most of the time. She saw all this by the floury glow of the streetlight. They stood under it, beside the pole. Pale moths and other insects made the air dangerous with the little uncontrollable religiously ecstatic missiles of their light-smitten bodies.

"Wall, hit seems lak it were las spring. Leastways ah think hit were. He went orf one nat and come back eerly, bout eight uh clock. Ah rekkun thas rat."

"Yeh, yeh, but what was that about a fight?" said the Old Man encouragingly. He feared another bottleneck, so he used his talk as if he were taking her by the elbow and guiding her on.

"Enyways," continued the little humble woman, her infantile boy sagging down like a sack of cement upon her protruding belly, "she war aleavin' him, hed er sootcase awl packed up en awl. En he — you

know him, how he weren't quat rat in is head, Ah mean. Ah rekkun he were aw rat in is uther perts — " Here the little humble woman broke into a little unexpected flurry of laughter that the Old Man privately thought mighty incongruous, but she at once looked so embarrassed, ducking her head and not eyeing him any more, that he retracted his indignation and substituted impatience again.

"But what was that you said about a fight?" repeated the Old Man in tones that suggested he was exerting his patience to the utmost, encouraging, but terse and rapidly approaching explosion.

(Simultaneously, like a dying ember blown up miraculously into a ruddy glow, at last the knowledge that Ezra had been all that while neurotic and never very far from mental illness throughout his life, this knowledge, which had been traveling in the obscure circuits of the Old Man's consciousness, finally reached the very seat of his cognition. The Old Man finally saw what he had known all along.

The Old Man knew that all men were ever close to mental sickness. Some men had built up, or never had destroyed, natural immunities. But many minds are made of delicate tissues of illusions, easily bruised, prone to tear under stresses in those vulnerable spots. So many vulnerable spots, just as the body is so vulnerable, the living tissue.)

"Wall, Ben Sneed, he seen em thru tha winders — ya know ya kin see rat inter tha house — he seen this" (she hesitated, pronounced the name painfully, as if she suspected she was doing a wrong thing) "this

Ezry — hain't thet whatchu call yur son, thet is, yur son-in-law?" And lo, the little deviations were begun all over again.

But no, now she had hit upon it. "Yeh, he seen yur son-in-law, thish yere Ezry, chokin' er." Her voice had suddenly died to a terrible whisper, in which the world became painfully real, like the lull in a storm.

Then just as suddenly her voice opened out again, its normal loud tones now sounding like a shriek. "Thish yere Ben — you know ole Ben, ah rekkun," she said in coaxing tones, the Old Man impatiently nodding his head up and down as hard as he could nod, "he run en hollered en Fletchur — thas ma husbun, Fletchur, he wuz on tha back porch cleanin is gun, ez ee wuz figgerin on uhgoin huntin tha nex day — thet wuz tha trip when he seed thet big bear — you mighta heered bout it — " Here the Old Man stopped nodding his head up and down and began to shake it from side to side vigorously, violently in fact, as if with an emphasis which bordered on hysteria. But convention and good manners had put a gag in his mouth.

"Wall, enyways," said the little humble woman, growing more and more tired in demeanor, "enyways." She paused vacantly, perfectly bewildered by the maze into which she had worked herself.

The Old Man deadpanned, kept a scorching silence, himself "burned up" by the utter waste and lack of discrimination in this conversation. If he had not been so anxious and wrought up to it before-

hand, he might have walked off and left the little humble woman in the midst of her labyrinthine rigmarole.

"Wall," said the little woman lamely, "he almost kilt her, chokin er thet way, but ee left orf when Ben and Fletchur run up. Ah don know where he went ta. Ah jes don know. We kinna guessed, we hain't poztive uv course, but we got reezun ta bleeve thet ee wuz so put out by findin her bout ta leave im thet ee jes los is hed onct an fer awl. Ee jes tha week before thet los is job, ya know. En we rekkun hit were jes tew much fer im."

The little woman heaved a mighty sigh of relief, feeling that her duty was done.

The Old Man grunted. He had one more question to put to her. "Do you know where he is at now?"

"Noo," responded the little humble woman, pursing her lips so that they wrinkled into one terrible little pucker. She hoisted the heavy pallid little boy with a sigh. "But," she added helpfully, "*she's* in the horspitul et Custanooga. Ya see, when he let go uv her, *she* fell hon top tha stove."

The Old Man grunted as if, all and all, it added up to a final sum like a billion dollars, beyond his present abilities to realize. "Well, thanks a lot," he said suddenly.

"Oh-ho-ho, donchu mention hit, Sir. Donchu thing nothin uv hit. Ah wuz so heppy ah cud hep yuh out. Now, if'n yuh don mine, ah ull git uhlong en pit thish yere boy ter bed." And she hoisted her infant son quite violently to save him from the shock of

hitting the crushed shell road with all of his relaxed weight.

"Yeh, I know," said the Old Man wearily. "Well, good night."

"Gude nat," said the little humble woman, and she disappeared swiftly over the streets, her little misshapen figure weaving into the darkness (and more lopsided than ever under its strange burden) while the Old Man strode on his little unsteady bowlegs down the street in pursuit of the Old Woman, who had been swallowed up in the opaque darkness.

Thus through queer coincidence the Old Man met up with news of his erstwhile son-in-law, Ezra, just as in the movies and the women's magazines the heroine and hero meet up with each other after long estrangement.

The Old Romeo-and-Juliet theme of interwoven destinies, which is so rare a phenomenon perhaps, but like Santa Claus, made much of. (Destiny has become an archaic expression, a meaningless word, to the scientific masses of today. Only the quaint literary folk use it, it seems. We are proud that we are starless. Yet, our stars rise and fall in heavenly quietude anyhow. We fulfill destinies. It is just that we can no longer pretend that we are prophets, for we see now that there are forces acting far beyond our paralytic abilities to realize. We move in circles, we travel a race track. We call this movement logic.)

Of course this was more on the "sworn enemies" order of theme, like those so often portrayed in movies and stories of the Wild West. And yet it wasn't. Nor was the Old Man looking for clues to a

mystery, like a Scotland Yarder. The Old Man was merely curious, would have liked to keep tabs on Ezra for the children's sake, to insure their safety, *et al.* He felt no need for revenge or a final drastic settlement, nothing melodramatic. Let life simply flow, like Sweet Afton, and the children grow sweetly.

How the Children Grew Sweetly

If ever a child hated Shirley Temple, that child was Ethel. Ethel kept thinking bitterly, as she watched the sunny dimpled little darling dancing around like a fat little sprite, thoughts often expressed by this timeworn sentence: "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

(She thought it strange that the boys did not understand this gritty envy of hers. How could they? They were boys considering the merits of a little girl. Will there ever be a complete understanding between sexes? That chasm.)

The usurper of Ethel's heart was not only a green-eyed monster but a moon-eyed one as well. How often she crept off to bed early or spent hours locked with herself in the supreme sanctuary of the bathroom and feasted on the forbidden fruit of daydreams. (How much energy is wasted all over the worlds in infertile daydreams, and conversely, how much of life bears tribute to their fertility.)

This old thing between Ethel and the Old Woman had grown steadily as they grew older together. Ethel was more the Old Man's girl, with an old sentimental attachment existing from way back, and

both Ethel and the Old Woman knew it. With her powerful instinct for self-preservation, Ethel frequently used her knowledge like a truncheon. *"I love Granddaddy,"* she would say triumphantly, noticeably omitting the Old Woman from the pact. Whereas the Old Woman could as frequently be heard muttering to herself as she went about her chores, finding choice arguments to bring Ethel to her knees before catastrophe.

Sometimes the harassed Old Man, finding himself in the center of their arguments, would pronounce loudly: "O, plague take both of you!" and then he would stomp off and out of the house growling and in rare high dudgeon.

"I wish I'd never been born," Ethel might hiss between clenched teeth, to which the Old Woman might reply with testy vehemence, "Well, I wish you hadn't, neither."

The Old Woman held a tyranny over the girl, adjuring her to remember that she owed everything to her granddaddy and her grandmama, saying that when *she* had been a growing girl she had been *glad* to help her Mama and take the load of household cares off her Mama's shoulders.

(The Old Woman seemed to be failing fast. Anxieties and hard work were taking their toll. It made Ethel sick to watch her, knowing that she in part would be responsible if the Old Woman was brought to an early death. A morbid fatality seemed to be coloring all the Old Woman's mental life, and she grew more and more listless and childishly wistful and withdrawn from the children.)

The Old Woman was too mentally rigidified by the great weight of past experience, too inelastic, to understand the interests and demands of this onrushing generation. Ethel had even been terrified out of having any teen-age friends, for if they came near the house and began carrying on, the Old Woman would be heard muttering in the kitchen, all about "that ongrateful little wretch" of a granddaughter, "bringing that pack of foolishness" into the house, when she ought to be "heppin" her poor old granny. And her old lush quavering voice would rise in a bitter plaint: "They don't know what the old folks haf ta put up with. They don't care. They don't pay any attention to the old folks. Oh, no." Vigorous headshaking.

The girls never flocked to Ethel's house anyway, because, for one reason, the interior was so shabby and funereal and oppressive. And Ethel could never offer them anything to eat. Once the unfortunate girl had gone bravely into the kitchen to get some oranges for them, at their strong hints and suggestion. The Old Woman, who was huddling in the kitchen chair nursing her fury, came sidling rapidly across the floor at her like a belligerent crab. In whispers so fierce they could be heard all over the house, and out in the streets besides, she made her resentment known.

"When are you going to begin doing for your poor old grandparents?" she whispered like a scream. There never was a girl who hated housework as much as Ethel did. "Instead of you bringing in that pack

of silly girls everytime a body's back is turned, why don't you get to work and *do* something?"

Now the sad part of this chronicle is that the Old Woman's accusations were in her sense justified. Never thanks did the poor old frowzy woman get for her mite, and Ethel scorned her, was most uncooperative. Ethel, like so many young people, had the idea that human beings did not have to work, that labor was ignoble and mean, and that the world could very well get along without labor of most any kind.

On another tack, Ethel reasoned blindly that each person was due some measure of independence, that people should tend to their own businesses, and that when one person created a mess, that same person should clean it up. Ethel never realized how very dependent she was upon the travails of the Old Man and the Old Woman. (Perhaps she thought hard labor was all that old people were good for.) Poor deluded little human being, she fancied that the world might be better off if young human beings did not labor like beasts of burden, but lived free, like the wild beasts. A comb of honey, a bed of leaves.

She had not come to realize how necessary work was to the health of a personality, how labor so often means good.

"I just wanted to get a couple of oranges," Ethel whimpered in response to the Old Woman's bridling attack. Ethel's face grew pouty-ugly instead of tragically beautiful as she would have liked it, as she more

than likely assumed it to be. Her ugliness only made the Old Woman feel exalted, just as it made Ethel look ignoble.

"If'n you don't take them girls clean out of here, why, why, I'll make a scene you won't forget in a hurry," promised the Old Woman in a savage torrential whisper. She was almost beside herself, at least she looked on the verge of drastic action. Her thumbs and forefingers were curled up in little claws held poised over her sunken bosom. They were like hideous puppets in a Punch and Judy show, jerky and outrageous, acting out a terrible human farce of irrational passion.

The Old Woman didn't intend to be "mean." It was simply that as a mother she was out of her element. The ocean of the present went clean over her head.

Ethel's deepest wound was her clothing. It was not pretty and stylish like other girls', she thought. Her Sunday dress had ruffles on it at a time when ruffles were no longer pretty in stale eyes. She could not wear slacks as other girls did, and shorts and riding pants. She was ashamed of her plain shapeless clothes. They made her feel incurably gawky.

So that Ethel's only friends were the socially outcast Mirabella girls. Even they could use rouge and lipstick, whereas Ethel could not. Ethel looked at their glittering red fingernails with the frown of the have-not. Yes, Ethel's playmates were dagos. And let the Old Woman squawk if she wanted to. A girl must have friends. We were not made for loneliness. Loneliness breeds delusions and that queer individ-

uality we associate with mental ills. Society is the yardstick we must measure our actions by.

The beloved schoolteacher had left for a position somewhere upcountry, and Ethel's heart had been crushed with hopeless longing. No one knew, so that no one could understand, her undue ferocity at that time, but it was as if her foundations had been snatched from under her. Wretchedness and a threat of utter despair were the termites at the bottom of it. "Why was I born?" was the pitiful thought that nagged her. "Why go on? Why do people live?" She doubted the whole structure of her existence. She could not live without him, that dream of him (she knew he was a dream).

Clumsily the Old Woman had tried several times to make friends all over again with her, a truce. The Old Woman's conscience panged, but Ethel had snapped at her so that, as the Old Woman remarked to the Old Man in bed that night, it seemed as if Ethel just *wanted* to be unhappy. And the Old Woman sighed.

Perhaps Ethel's terrible individual tragedy was that she could not express what was going on inside her. She was held bound fast by a chain of invisibles: her own inarticulateness and the absence of an ear to listen with thoughtful sympathy and gentle understanding.

The Mirabella girls were the only schoolmates she had to whom she did not feel somehow inferior. To them she felt uncomfortably superior. Nowhere ever did she feel on an equal footing with acquaintances, not even at home.

Mutt? The little boy she had despised? Mutt was someone else now, not to be despised, as different from Ethel in personal appearance and outlook as day is from night.

He was a bright-looking friendly and growing little ragamuffin, full of impulsive energies. He made a lot of warm noise, laughing and chattering with perfect freedom. He seemed to have no secrets. And his thoughts were of an amazing unself-conscious innocence. He did not seem to realize that people might be unlike him, be cynical, sarcastic, complex, unswerving, deep. His world was bright — and empty perhaps, empty of pain and responsibility and philosophies and heartrending problems — with wind and excited peddling of borrowed bicycles and twine and earthworms. He lived adventure, buoyant puerile adventure. *Tom Swift, Dave Dashaway, The Rover Boys, Buck Rogers.*

He had a wonderful new friend, the boy who lived out at the dairy, who rode his pony right on up into his mama's kitchen to get a piece of bread, who lolled on the ground with his head on a cow's belly.

Hilliard, that tiny waif of a freckled boy, was reported to his Grandmother as being the brightest child in the elementary school. Why? His attitude was so superior, his effort so all-absorbing, and his expression so wondrously successful. But why?

He consumed like a fire, greedily, lustfully. He seemed starved for life, so that anything that came to hand he seized and gulped down. Because he had such a shy exterior, such warm bright brown eyes

(as Ethel's had been), and such a fluent eloquence (when called upon to read in his school class from his primer he shouted the words with gusto, as if he were inspired) that his teachers adored him ("Ain't he the cutest thing!") and encouraged him on to greater accomplishment.

But, *why?* Why so? Why, of all people, was Hilliard the chosen one?

For one thing, his aloneness permitted his mental and spiritual growth. We are slowed down by congestion, social demands.

Then, when Nora had died Hilliard had been five years old. On him Nora had lavished so much supermaternity that it seemed that all his senses were awakened. He was intuitive.

And now when he was nine and ten he had already known so many emotions in his lifetime that he seemed almost like an old man.

Too, physically he was an elfin child. Being thus beautiful and evoking the treasurable responses of people sensitive to such beauty, he came to know a precocious poise. He was close to his Grandmama's heart and the Old Man's soul, and Ethel lavished on him all her devotion, humbly bringing her touching gifts to him.

He was a beautiful child, a tender soul, a shy and conscience-stricken person, and an inquisitive and active mind. He suffered as others suffered, he was sympathetic beyond measure, and he felt responsible for every part of the world in which he found himself.

Why?

Oh, we don't know. Perhaps a marriage of angels,

whereas most of the world is the offspring of a marriage between demons and angels.

It is rumored in scientific circles that the glands have something to do with persons, but how much, the exact quantity, is indeterminable. There is a vast difference between the glands and the soul.

More probably it was that in many subtle ways he profited from the blunders Ethel made, the foolishness Mutt was, the tragic terrors of the Old Woman, and the ripe warm human wisdom of the Old Man. He learned by observation, and there was much he could observe. And then, too, there were the glands.

(Thus the children grew, perverse, peculiar, and beset with twisting twirling thoughts illumined in each by a little individual flame. To trace their development is like following the tracks of ghosts. Nearer and nearer to each came the time when he or she would make his odyssey or her odyssey out into the world, never never to return. Sometime far in the future they might look back, their old and sadder, saner, minds mulling over their pasts — like urchins in a scrapheap — and realize that if their childhoods had been forged with pain, they were still living that pain. Although their own realization and subsequent actions might mitigate it, it always would be a snag, a sharp stick (a goad and a chastisement), so intensely they lived their foundling days in the foundry. O God, what jubilance, exuberance, terror, and pain.

Transition, ceaseless transition.)

The Yak

In wintertime, living that was designed for summertime and Greek heat was compressed into the tight hold of heater aurae; sunbrowned bodies were gowned in itchy flannel and garbed in sweaters made of barbed steel wool. Dirt and grease accumulated on the skin, for too much soap and water left the skin flaky and dry. Beards grew like bristly wire and hair grew filthy and draggling. Clothing was usually motheaten and shabby, and every other person was made more repulsive by a nasty oysterlike cold; sore throats made bad breath and hoarse rasping voices obvious. Sometimes it was excruciating torture to live.

As the cold wet sheets of wind swept in off the cold pounding fists of the sea, they whistled and moaned around the drafty wooden houses of the South, and the dancing sputtering fire in the little stoves seemed deplorably feeble.

Then an unspoken hurrah for summertime, when there was no smothering school in session and each day was a childhood epic.

In 1938 one of the Old Woman's childhood friends and companions returned from Chicago to the haunts of her childhood. Mrs. Claypool was an old lady now, but she had married late in life and had, at the age of forty ("mind you!"), borne a child.

Mrs. Claypool had many friends her age in Tupelo, for Mrs. Claypool had always been a sentimental gadder, but Mrs. Claypool always prettily called the Old Woman "mama," always sent her a Christ-

mas card with a lush little note attached and, usually now, a picture of her own "Babydoll."

Mrs. Claypool and her daughter Babydoll came to visit the Old Woman one fine sweltering summer afternoon when human bodies could not sweat because the air was already too heavy with moisture. The air clung warmly, adhesively, to objects animate and inanimate. The Old Woman made a valiant effort to overwhelm the overwhelming physical sensations with psychological vivacity. She called the children in, proudly presented them: "These are my grandchildren. This is Ethel, she's fifteen. . . ." Ethel blushed and bowed her head low and moved her legs awkwardly and wiggled her big bare toes; her faded washdress hung around her like a smelly sack.

"Oh, why she looks just like Nora, doesn't she, why I do declare," declared Mrs. Claypool with an enthusiastic splutter.

"And this is Mutt, he's fourteen. . . ."

"Hiya," said Mutt with a friendly squinty smile, and he rammed his big-balled fists down into his pockets and stood awkwardly first on one leg and then on the other. "My, isn't he fine!" ecstatically beamed Mrs. Claypool.

"And this here one is our baby, Hilliard. He's just eleven."

"Oh," squealed Mrs. Claypool with rapture. "Why he's just the same age as my Babydoll, isn't he? Just when was he born? October the twenty-first? Why, that's just two months and a half after Babydoll was born! Well, now, imagine that,"

beamed Mrs. Claypool with a triumphant air, as if she had seen a miracle with her own eyes, and she smoothed out a pleat on her white linen dress with a selfconscious air of satisfaction.

"Say something, Hilliard," said the Old Woman in a tart vexed tone.

"Hullo," said Hilliard, opening his mouth to reveal a hidden cache of gooey penny candy. He closed it guiltily.

"Well, now, why don't you children go somewhere and play while I talk to 'Mama Moore,'" suggested Mrs. Claypool in her gloating squiggly oil of demeanor. The Northerners apparently had been able to do nothing to her gushy ways.

The disagreeable responsibility of entertaining the prissy little Babydoll in her starched white silk frock fell upon the envious Ethel by reason of sex, and Ethel forthwith led the little exquisite out upon the backstoop where she engaged her in discussion of the problems of their age.

Eventually little Babydoll began to open up and reveal what lay inside her whelklike person. "I bet Mrs. Claypool is nice to have for a Mama," said Ethel, sniffing wistfully a little.

"Oh, I just hate her," whispered Babydoll vehemently, clenching her fists and looking out into the thick transparent air as if she saw dire events hatching there. Ethel stared in vain a moment for the phantom figures, then turned and stared at little dainty pudgy Babydoll instead.

"Why? She seems like an awfully sweet woman," faltered Ethel, much impressed.

"She's mean. She's a hypocrite," boiled Babydoll quietly. "Ooh, I'd just like to *kill* her!" Babydoll then sat quiet and staring, and imagined that she was scooping her fingernails full of the pale flesh in Mrs. Claypool's broad plumpish and powdered cheeks. How she would have loved to sting that hateful (hideous, she thought) face with slaps, that well-memorized projectory of profile. How she would have loved to snap that hateful hooked nose like an elastic, to mutilate all that hatefulness past recognition. Little spoiled and frustrated waif.

"I wish I had a Mama," scowled Ethel, miffed by the sudden withdrawal of her "company."

"Oh, you ought to be glad you don't," swore intense little Babydoll.

Finally they heard Mrs. Claypool calling Babydoll, and they went back to the front of the house. There they heard Mrs. Claypool inviting all three of them, the children, to go to the beach with her and her Babydoll the following afternoon. "Babydoll wants you to go with her," said Mrs. Claypool lovingly, but they knew, they knew. Babydoll had nothing to do with their invitation. The Old Woman was delighted, falling all over herself in gratitude. Even though they lived close to the water, this water nearby was polluted with the sewage of Tupelo, and the children had never been to Ramspeck's Beach, where the only sands fit to play in were, twenty miles away.

(What had the Indians done before the white men came and built their towns and sewers?)

Ethel had a morbid fear of the water, fear that

she might drown. She was always afraid of death, never venturing where she thought it likely to be met — in the streets and near strange electric wires. Mutt had learned to swim off the docks in the deep dangerous swirling and sweeping currents there, boasted of times he had thwarted the undertow, a naked little boy. Hilliard had seldom been near the great powerful lunging body of sea, had been too immersed in the world more near-by. He had seen the people cluster to view the crab-eaten and bloated bodies of dead men belatedly rescued from the sea, but he had never been thus curious. None of the children owned a bathing suit. Such extravagance was only for gadabouts and tourists.

How marvelous it was to ride in Mrs. Claypool's fat Chrysler. How marvelous it was to ride in an automobile at all. Poetry of motion, music of powerful motors, increased radius, a new kind of liberty. It was a true treat. They fairly flowed along over the asphalt through the savanna. The watery lowlands were filled with roaming herds of cattle. In one there was a wonderful Brahmin bull. "O, there's a yak," yelled Hilliard, hardly able to believe his eyes.

If Mrs. Claypool had not been so completely aware that she was giving these poor misguided underprivileged children a treat, if her condescension had even been just a little less benevolent, perhaps the children would have been happier.

But all the preparations they had made, borrowing ragged old motheaten bathing suits and worrying all night long and talking about it and treating it generally as if it had been a most momentous crisis, had

left them weary and acutely conscious that Mrs. Claypool was being very "nice" to take them. The way the Old Woman herself talked, it sounded like sheer charity.

Babydoll made no effort to make herself agreeable. She liked to be the center of attention. The children knew that they were supposed to fawn in gratitude. They knew which side this piece of bread was buttered on, and Babydoll knew it too.

The sea, the sea, the sea! The vast ruffled and marcelled plateau, reflecting the blue of the sky on one side of its upstarting waves, blue-black and blue, muddy green, muddy brown close by, with foamy crests peaking the multi-colored and rugged surfaces.

Mrs. Claypool drove the car straight out on a cape, so that the sea came swabbing and gulping in on either side of a narrow strip of fine white sand. Because movement is easily associated with life, there was something terrible and living about the sea. Its known but inscrutable densities held insatiable appetites for life. Being so nearly surrounded by water out on the tip of the long cape was both exciting and terrifying.

Seashells spread their many-hued ears and quietly roaring mouths and shallow dishes in a fairy scene over all the sand. Pink and pale baby-blue clouds reared their turreted Byzantine mosques high over the crawling sea.

Hilliard lay down in the sand, spread-eagle like a newspaper on a linoleum floor, and peered deep into the sky. As he lay there, and it felt as if the earth tilted all its massive weight toward the western side

of its own total globe perpetually (had its weight tilted for it by great and greater forces, solar and otherwise — the puny little planet), and the sea sang joyously and noisily all around him, to his utter amazement he saw the moon racing through sky-space toward a rotund cluster of pale-rimmed motionless cloud. He gasped. Then as the daymoon, the white bean, showed dimly through the fleecy mass, he suddenly caught his senses and realized his monster error. After that it was the flying cloud that flew through the stormy sea of sky and between the earth and the moon.

They were noisy, because the sea and wind were noisy and noise seemed to provoke noise. A self-defense.

Mrs. Claypool had brought a crabnet, and she waded along the shore scooping up crabs. There were some great dripping blue and white crabs, beautiful and bubbling frothily around their mouths, protesting this outrage. Along the shore there was also some strange orange foam, which Hilliard with his childishly suspicious and imaginative mind suspected of being poisonous, but the more he thought about it the more irrational he saw his suspicion to be: it was only clay in the surf, clay brought through some creek or rivermouth down to the sea.

Soon the subdued sun had passed crabwise through the sky and hung on the edge, streaming. Lo, it was time to go home. Lord, how they wished they could stay.

All the way home they were pensive. Ethel thought how she would travel one day, travel and never re-

turn. The red sunblob sagged visibly on the western horizon. The dark areas of shadows stretched out over the earth. The rays of the sun skated obliquely through the clouds and atmospheres, spreading pleated fans of light. The rich luminous and living green faded into olive drab. The car sped purring through eternities illuminated by each peculiar mind.

To Hilliard it seemed that diurnally, at sunset, he began to lose his fine control over his world. It was his rhythm. His masterful equilibrium would leave him. If he had been a drunkard, it was at this time of day that he would have craved whiskey. But generally, once darkness rolled solidly around, he was himself again, except that in weariness he might be susceptible to exaggerations and muddled thinking.

Mutt fell asleep, and Hilliard had a violent impulse to awaken him, to make him present again.

Up in the front seat — the little trio occupied the rear seat — Babydoll begged her Mama into pampering her with lullaby speech by the simple expedient of asking many rude questions about this and that she had seen.

4
The Human Heritage

The Old Man of 1938

He was seventy or thereabouts. The passage of ill-defined years found him still hardworking. The last time we mentioned his work he was on the P. W. A. He had spent a subsequent period of time working his own projects as his own boss. Now he was head of a county unit working on the W. P. A. One just couldn't get away from the government those days. In 1938 there were about as many poor men in the United States as there had ever been, even during the ghastly heights of the Depression. These were the true forgotten men because the conscience of the country did not invite criticism of its own failure. To see is easy; to see what you want to see is as easy as skimming milk; but to see studiously and laboriously and honestly exhausts peace and wrings the heart and painfully enlarges the mind. The expansion of the mind means uncertainty and many failures and many aggressions. It is better to break the back with labor than to enlarge the mind.

As always, the times were bad.

The faint pearly glow of early morning was imbued with an infantile vigor hardly to be recognized later in the full strength of the herculean noon.

It stole through the hallways and brought the first sketchy outlines of visibility into quiet rooms. It revealed those strange mounds of exquisite potentialities (for as such they recognized themselves, though most of them usually had trouble recognizing each other as same, scratched their heads dubiously, seldom happy about what they saw in the others) lying up in an ominous inertia in the middle of their beds.

In the merciful unconsciousness of sleep the world had no seamy side. Dreams were lurid and like delirium, yes, but were never drab dreams and seamy.

While the cool currents of nocturnal air were being systematically heated by the vast solar engine myriad miles away, the first liquid sunlight tinted with golden transparency the eastern eaves, walls, and porches.

The enormous complex industry of the universe worked with tireless efficacy in its superior dominion of existence, while the ephemera of human consciousness were still largely blotted out.

Those human beings first to stir found the quiet company of stealthy cats and the first twittering birds opening their beaks to the sun both soothing and weird. Perhaps they found it the most beautiful piece of day, though some perhaps preferred the maturity of evening.

The Old Man was first to waken in his dark chilly house. He would have liked to stay in the warm light holster his blanket made, molded onto his shrinking and fibrous old physique, but he knew what he had to do, and he sat up on the edge of the bed, yawning and pulling his socks on.

Somewhere off in the remainder of the house a bedspring spoke, but no one got up this early in this particular household except the Old Woman and himself, so he thought nothing of that profane sound, being already halfway into his trousers anyway.

He left his shirt-tails out and his pants unbuttoned until he had relieved himself of burdens in the bathroom. As he shuffled with slow rhythmical man-steps down the hall that divided the house, he could glimpse Ethel's mummy on the cot in her little room, her dark mousy hair flowing stringily out of the top. He almost smiled happily to himself with loving possessiveness, and then he got to wondering what for. In the bathroom he renewed his powers of consciousness by dashing the blasting water from the faucet against his grizzly old rough-hewn face.

There was a rustling sound behind him, and the Old Woman was beside him, like a wraith in her nightgown, her gray hair streaming and her dim blue eyes wide and empty with sleep. When he had clapped his teeth into his mouth and taken his dripping hands to the dirty towel, and then when he went beyond her through the door, she squatted quietly onto the toilet, feeling very old and very weary. "I go to bed tard and I get up tard," she crooned in her soft old mournful voice.

The Old Man put the plug of the electric percolator into the wall-socket in the kitchen. He performed this ritual like an automaton, this trite use of slave electricity, while an insistence kept shaping itself in his mind: "Turn on the radio and get the news."

For the Old Man had long before identified himself with the world.

O, he had seen crisis after crisis come and pass, and days when he had wondered if dawn would come again, and now he knew that eternity held the universe in solution, and that agony and hope and resolution and despair were universal emotions, and that in each man the fight for his individually harmonious universe must take place, and that he was only an iota in the world.

Yes, the natural fatigue of old age brought with it states of depression and cements of pessimism. It seemed to him, despite what he knew, that the good days had been the days of his youth, and that the world seemed to be going from bad to worse, and that with his own decline he was watching the decline of the world.

How many times, unwittingly, he had been shocked on realization that to his grandchildren today's world seemed uncommonly glorious and exciting, and he had often started to set them aright, to correct them, when suddenly he remembered that he was only an old fool and had shut up in the nick of time.

He might even chuckle a little, cynically, at his impetuosity. "Gee, I almost put my foot in it that time, didn't I, Tom?" he would murmur in soft tenor to the tomcat. Or he might feel the poignancy of his error and have a few bright tears glisten a minute or two in his eyes.

Sometimes one of his many personalities would pound and bellow, "But I don't want to grow old!"

and old age would seem like a drastic renovation, cheap and snarled. But regretting old age was like saying whoa to the wind. You try saying whoa to a blustering wind.

As he went to his chair, the easy chair to which he had treated himself not so long before, proof of his adequate prosperity (it was known to the tradespeople as the Mullenbeaver Lounger, long life-wear guaranteed), he called into the house at large: "Old Woman, you want tuh lissen tuh my news program?"

She came scurrying out of the back reaches of the house, putting an enormous hairpin into the flat bun on the top of her head. He waited with grim patience until she was seated. Slowly, deliberately, and with enormous natural dignity, as befitting a man who controls the jinns of radio, he turned the tiny knob.

Then as he sat back with that same admirable composure and waited while his instrument tuned up, the Old Woman was seized by a thought, an irresistible "idee." She scraped her screeching protesting wooden rocker over the wooden floor right up to the radio cabinet. There she subsided breathlessly and resumed her grooming (her toilet), her soft woman's face assuming a bland smile of self-satisfaction.

Once the Old Woman had been beautiful.

The Old Man, who had viewed her activity with an old benign contempt bred in him by having watched like goings-on for well over forty years, now turned his ripe old attention to the radio, which began to vibrate and hum with impressive intensity.

There was a queer curdling "boom-warrruk" and then a loud blur of sound, which he tuned down with

great patience and spare movement and then dialed to frequency 1100 kilocycles, where the morning news, as interpreted by Billingsley Matthews Branders could be found (on that tiny point susceptible to the shadow of the pointer — at least that's how it looked) if the program was not apostrophied by static and other such peculiar phenomena as Cuban exuberance.

Presently the feverish voice of Billingsley Matthews Branders came into their presence.

"The great common people of America, the good average man, are thinking, 'Why should we fight Europe's wars, then pay Europe's debts and feed Europe's starving and foolish people? Puny minds, theirs, minds too slothful to find better ways of doing.' It seems that Europe is a perpetual hotbed for wars, ever breeding, never ceasing. Wrangles, Eurangles. Why should America be expected to mother the world?"

At one point in the commentator's discourse the Old Man, powerfully swayed, murmured disgustedly, "Heck, let *them* worry about that!" But the Old Man was really worried, and he showed it.

The Old Woman chimed in, at this signal, "We went in and won the war for them last time, and look how they used that victory." The Old Woman waxed quite indignant.

Then the fickle Old Man, suddenly perceiving the stupidity of his own argument by hearing it from another person's lips, switched over to the other side of the argument and said soberly, "Well, you pay for being the most powerful nation on the earth."

As if to take the words right out of his mouth, Billingsley Matthews Branders finished his discourse on world news with those very words, "America . . . the most powerful nation on earth . . . what will she do to cure the cancerous growth of totalitarian militarism before it spreads throughout the tissues of the world?"

And with these poetic sentiments on an international theme, Billingsley Matthews Branders signed off the air with his usual "Good morning, Mother."

"I sure do like to hear him talk," said the Old Woman dreamily, rocking her foot. "I sure do. Such a fine clean-sounding fellow. I wonder if he smokes."

"Ah, he's all right," yawned the Old Man. Something about the way the man signed off the air nipped the Old Man savagely. "Good morning, Mother." Twitterwitterweet. What kind of a tomfool said that?

The announcer was now bouncily present with his genial warm cozy ooze.

"Sa-a-ay! Do you have that worn tired-out feeling every morning before breakfast?" ("Yeah," interpolated the Old Man, like a cat stalking a mouse.) "Well then," said the announcer. ("Um hm," purred the Old Man deceitfully, and he listened eagerly.) "What you need is a" ("What?" said the Old Man savagely winning) "good thorough overhauling by nature's own little helpmates, Vita-Life. Yes, sir." ("Mmm hm," smirked the terrible supercilious little Old Man, and with a joyful little pounce he cut the announcer dead with a twist of his paw.)

The Sultan of the Alley

The sun was fat as a sausage beyond the eastern trees. The Old Man stepped out onto the back-door stoop in his work clothes, which were at that advanced stage where they could stand alone, they were so laden with dirt and grease. (But the giant earth is covered with dirt, and the human body itself is a package of grease, and the Old Man would have given a snort of contempt for any other opinion concerning his work clothes.)

The small wraith of a waiflike and wholly black plush cat who made passionate advances against his pants legs was lonely, hungry, and insistent. It talked Chinese to him, a strange inquisitive tonal expression based more on sounding emotion than inherent abstract logic. "Yow wer yung wowr?" it said very plainly and agreeably.

"Don't you try any of that nonsense on me," growled the Old Man. The old grouch. Sometimes he got so disgusted with all the world. He stood on the doorstep with one hip hoisted and the other leg slack. He was seventy years old and almost ready for paradise, but despite his lifetime enterprise paradise never had seemed more remote in the world, utopia never so silly. Fifty years before, he had thought that in another fifty years everything would be hunkydory. In his exuberant youthful moments of grand perspectives he had seen a mellow and famous old age awaiting him.

But bah! He wouldn't waste his valuable time thinking about yesterday in that ridiculous summing-

up sense. He was preoccupied with the terrible urgency and waywardness of his today. Sunbeams lightly bombarded him, but he felt them only through a tenuous and servant's-entrance sensibility. Had the sunlight been darkness his vision could not have been more grim.

He could feel the cat's motor humming at his feet and he felt the tugs to and fro as the cat lavished its affection on his pants legs. "Varmint," he muttered from force of habit, and his mind moved on, reading the chain of images dragged through it by the prompter in him. Reader of braille.

The hiccup of the percolator finally reached him through the densities of the stage settings in the theater of his consciousness. With a start he made his puzzling way back into the kitchen. The screen door scraped shut. As he got his cup and saucer down out from the cupboard his jaw moved slightly, he mumbled as he talked things over in his mind.

The cat was now rubbing to and fro against the screen. The little black mug was opened from time to time so that the bristly little pink tongue was displayed in its jewel case, and the elegant black plush body went ceaselessly to and fro. The tiny paws opened and closed little cloverleafs rhythmically on the floor, spiking the wood with tiny sharp claws. The Old Man was gazing deep into the kitchen wall and shaking his head over nationwide uncertainties when he heard that curious zooming sound which meant the cat was shaking the wire screen on the back screen door. Looking sideways the Old Man could see the cat. It was stretching itself by rearing

up on its hindlegs, its front paws walking right up the screen as far as they could go. This little pirate of a cat was always indulging in the luxury of stretching. It might rear forward on its front paws, dragging the hindlegs far out low behind it. Then it would double up behind, so that its thick black tail stuck straight up into the air, waving gently and curling a little at the tip like a tendril, and its little rear-end was as high as it could go while the front paws stretched out low. Then it would arch its back in the middle. Then it would lie down again and go to sleep.

The Old Man, continuing in his pessimistic perplexity, suddenly felt very lonely, and it was at such times that he felt very grateful for Tom. Tom was what he called the cat. Tom was the only being the Old Man could really feel a hoot about sometimes. Tom had such a comforting philosophy of imperviousness to nerve-racking national and international situations.

"Tom," said the Old Man experimentally, "what do you think of all this European mess?" Tom gave the Old Man a queer look and sat up and scratched its fleas. Then he lay down again slowly, stubbornly, as if that was all he had to say.

"Heck," said the Old Man in disgust. "You don't know any more than the rest of us." Tom said nothing to this, but his facial expression was one of piety, proof against insult.

Sure, Tom was a braggart and a beggar, a pirate and a pious old-maidish bachelor, a lazybones who welcomed the doldrums, and a playboy and a rake. After some of his Don Juan imitations, he would

come home to swagger wearily around. (Once the Old Man accused him of having the "bighead." He had looked at the old man with a quiet cold sneer.) He could be brutish, swinish. Sometimes as he sat in the yard with a stupid sulky expression on his low-browed face, the tip of his pink tongue poking out a little through the invisible cleft above his little black chin and below his long fine black moustache, he looked like a Lombroso archtype, a criminal in truth. There was no telling how many murderous intents he had or how many orgies he had indulged himself in the preceding night. The Old Man had heard him singing those vehement passionate songs — not love songs, but lust songs — that were so like a child's weeping, ululations.

You may wonder why such a pragmatist as the Old Man would ever bother his head with such a fleabitten and short-thoughted animal. Well, that little black hypocrite could be one of the most affectionate and genteel of cats, all sleek and polished elegance and agreeable conversation. As some cats were beastly low and powerfully built lungers, this one was a tall intellectual standing high on thin long legs based on tiny feet. It was fat, its belly round, but its slender black stems never ripened and developed cylindrically in Hollywoodlike proportion to its body. It was as swift on its feet as a ball of wind. It strolled beside the Old Man's abscissae legs with a quiet purr of bliss and confidence. When strangers came to engage the Old Man in conversation, it vanished, ethereally fleet. When it was startled it could jump a good six feet. It was the feline counterpart of

Gunder Haag. Ordinarily the Old Man had little to do with cats, stated a genuine preference for dogs, but this cat possessed a god, a heathen god.

Besides, the pitiful plight of its infanthood had gotten under the Old Man's skin. It had been one of four kittens born in the Old Man's woodpile. Its mother had been a dowdy little bovine feline, black with white bib and white forepaws. Its father had been a black pantherlike tomcat that came that way sometimes to raise hell and sire such. Its mother was killed early by a playful boy with a .22 rifle as she crossed the alley to bring her children their milk. The four entirely black kittens ("Little niggers," the Old Woman had called them) had been very sickly. A disease of the eyes had totally blinded one, and all the others were affected: Tom had only one good eye, a milky cloud on the cornea over the iris and pupil of the other one (that lovely green iris and elastic black slit of a pupil). The kittens were quite wild.

It was Hilliard who got the Old Man to chloroform the other three kittens. Hilliard had always been oversensitive to the suffering of animals and human beings. Once he had seen a sooty patchy-furred kitten huddling shivering against the drugstore curb downtown, its mews of misery lost on the noisy blasts of air, and he had never gotten over it. He dreamed of that sight at night. "I wish all kitties were chloroformed," he blubbered, as a child, "so as none of them could get like that."

Oh, Hilliard, wait until later years, when you might well wish that all children might be piped into

the sea and mercifully drowned. Death sometimes, to our abnormally great weary aching hearts, seems so healthy. O Creator, All Powerful Force, obliterate us. We are proven unfit to live. Oh, Hilliard, in your teens you are doomed to lie awake and staring while a large part of the tired misunderstood and misunderstanding world lies asleep, and swiftly you will be shuttled from pillar to post, while in the very next room the Old Man and the Old Woman rhythmically breathe, and you will want to cry out, and the unconventional cry will be strangled in your taut throat, and you will be what they call a "neurotic Nelly," submerged in neurotic grief for abstract humanity. You will know the shattering force of dry imperceptible sobs.

One little black savage the Old Man was not able to catch. All he or anyone else saw of it for a long time was a pointed black tail. One heard a scamper and scramble, saw the tip of a tail, and curtains. That was the child Tom.

Tom had gradually lost his wildness: he had been so lonely and now he was the Old Man's sidekick. Yes, the Old Man seemed to get a big kick out of pretending that the cat was full of saucy and pungent opinions about life. When it pled softly and sweetly for a wee bit of attention the Old Man said that Tom said he was hungry. He talked so eloquently sometimes that he seemed human. In the wintertime he could be heard under the floorboards at their feet, protesting bitterly about the hard cold. When he was being sulky and silent the Old Man announced dogmatically, "You needn't go around here with your

lip stuck out." At which Tom gave the Old Man a mean look and a ferocious snappy answer.

The time the Old Man grew most tense and silent on the subject of Tom was when Tom stealthily stalked some giddy and evasive little warbler. Tom frequently made passes at some of the fat little birds that whirred and cheerily chattered around the fruit trees. Sometimes Tom caught a mouse, a tiny little gray furry being whose tail was usually twice as long as its body. The Old Man had watched Tom play with its captive, which crouched and ran at first, only to be blocked and tossed up into the air by Tom's paw and crushed by that same paw as it came down. When the mouse was all dead and bruised and bleeding, Tom sat down on fenderlike haunches to get at the business of eating it. Tom ate it greedily — little teeth, skin, and all.

Even to an old man like the Old Man, at this world time Tom's behavior seemed atrocious. The soft lives of most Americans contained a dread of physical violences. This was why so many of them repeated to themselves over and over again that America must not enter the next European brawl. War is so uncivilized.

This morning the little filthy cat of hideous soullessness finally tired of the Old Man's nonco-operation and went off blabbing its peculiar querulous plaints. The Old Man could hear it go all under the house and out again on the other side, that gabby tomcat, black as a pot, with one eye burst and healed of its own accord into a bulbous horror, and on tiny feet possessing an insect's leapability. Its lip was

probably "stuck out," but it was tough. It would live. (Why?) It had lived. (How?)

When the Old Man stepped out onto the back stoop again, the morning was tepid. The Old Man had his dinner pail this time.

As he munched into the alley with a soft easy gait, the sun moved with him into the clearing beyond the alley. There was evidence that the sunlings, white and blindingly naked in the central glare, were energetically stoking the old sun-ship launched from the rim of the world.

Tom's friend, for whom Tom often begged extra scraps (little black liar, pretending to be still hungry) and with whom Tom shared many experiences, Tom's pal, was bunched up into a big orange ball on top of a thin long post standing upright in the ground. This scavenger of the long thin and anxious face lived in the alley outside the Old Man's pale. It was amazing to see such equilibrium as the billowing ball of cat displayed on a surface about the size of a dime (exaggeration of its smallness). This hungry being (like the greater population of India and China, it was always hungry) blinked eastward, wooed by the sun, closing its eyes fitfully (such rapture!) until the cough of the Old Man betrayed the Old Man's presence. Then it sprang up in great alarm, somersaulted in the air, landed crouched for a run, galloped grotesquely up the alley, and disappeared in a culvert connecting ditches.

Mutt is a Man

Every summer morning at 8:30 or thereabouts, except on Sundays, young Mutt — or Icky, as he was sometimes known these days — was on view briefly on the streets between the house and town. He came bicycling down Main Street, his arms folded conspicuously to set off the clean nakedness of the handlebars, on which no human hands were resting.

How he had come by his bicycle was a long tale told in nickels and dimes, but now he had had it a "coupla" years, and already he was outgrowing it, its plain spare style and its undersized proportions.

As he approached the curb he thrust his long legs rapidly across the bar between the seat and the handlebars, his fourteen-year-old legs, and landed standing upright upon the pavement, testimony to his skill and dexterity. This he accomplished with the languor of a very young man burdened with the cares and aptitudes of a man in the prime of his life, the very cream.

As he strode down the wide sidewalk he glanced stealthily sidelong at his reflection in the plate-glass windows, and was thus encouraged to bound a little up and down as he paced, or as he "ranged," and to swell his birdbreast. Ah, how luxurious it was to be a man in this manly world, to be male and desirable instead of female and desiring, which was the way Mutt saw it.

His eyes glittered with manly thoughts beneath his long lashes, and the muscles in his face twitched mutinously with the impulse to portray a nameless glee

tickling his proverbial gizzard. Meanwhile the down on his upper lip was soft and wet with perspiration. His scalp was baked where the sun had looked down, laden as it was with greased hair swept backwards in the most beautiful pompadour. It was a sultry day at eight o'clock in the morning. He began to feel bored with himself, and he languished as he walked. He parked his bicycle in front of the drugstore and entered to assume his clerkship.

How beautiful was the drugstore — its tile floor and handsome glass showcases, its slick alluring magazines and beribboned chocolate boxes and elegant cosmetics and resplendent soda fountain. How lucky Mutt was to be working there instead of in the putrid flyspecked vegetable-rotting, fruit-can-stacks atmosphere of the gay loud crude and countrified grocery store. How pitiful was that dingy cheap crowded rhinestone palace, the ten cent store next door. All those counters filled with buttons and hairpins and pencils and garters. Penny candy. O, how lucky was lucky Mutt to be working in the excellent excellence of the drugstore.

He took his career seriously. He prided himself on his professional manner, hoped that he made indelible impressions as being an extremely competent and at the same time charming young man, spent a minimum of two hours a day studying his personal appearance in the mirror over the fountain, and considered himself a wizard. His self was simply super.

Eddie was already there, another fourteen-year-old cowboy. (But Eddie, Mutt argued to himself, lacked style, temperament.) Eddie was drying some

glasses. "Say, Icky," Eddie invited warmly — Mutt was sometimes known as Icky these enormous wakeful days — "wanna hear the most vulgar joke ever has been told?" After this surefire bid, he waited for the enthusiastic response. Sure Mutt wanted to hear, but he couldn't afford to be too eager with his precious responses. "What?" he said in what he thought were languid and cynical tones.

Eddie deepened his voice as much as possible. (His voice was changing, and it kept shooting up from a monotonous metallic intonation, fundamentally deep, to a volatile falsetto.) He giggled contentedly before he began to growl. "Hee hee. Greetings, Ladies and Gentlemen: This is Nasty McNasal broadcasting from studio S–N–O–T in Snootful, Arizona. We now bring you a program of original melody. Here is Horrible McCootie and his Wolfgang Wheezers in their famous theme song, 'Oh You Booger, You.' "

They giggled and giggled. As he was too weakened to inhibit it, Mutt suffered an expulsion of gas. This added to the vastness of their laughter, the monstrous joke of their existence. "Har har har," roared Eddie. "I rekkun you fanned the wind."

"Whoops, backfired," sniggered Mutt. He put his hand over his mouth and bent double. He ran behind a counter and bent low with laughter, as if someone had yanked his nerve cord and folded him. He brushed the tears from eyes. "O gawd, this amusing world!" He leaned over the counter exhausted.

During the lull that followed this highly amusing little escapade, Eddie came close to Mutt and whis-

pered, "Say, did you see Jeanie last night? She was looking for you."

Where was that, Mutt wanted to know.

"At the picture show," said Eddie, surprised. "Say, didn't you know she was there?"

"Naw," said Mutt.

"Say, you know," said Eddie, "that girl's crazy about you."

"Naturally," said Mutt, with a little giggle of glee.

How good it was to be young and clean-limbed and pretty as a girl and infinitely more desirable. But it was still better to be growing old, to be getting husky, and to stride with a long slow rhythm, power, like a man. Jeanie was a dishwater blonde, sexy and quite uninhibited in ways for a girl thirteen years old. She was making the rounds. Almost every boy who was maturing at that time was at one time or another her sweetheart. Mutt was newly elected, much to his surprise, but he was "a good sport." He began to preen himself and to study sentimental gallantry, like some young upstart movie actor playing history as history is commonly supposed to have been — a mellow rose, a wax pear.

Before this dazzling young maiden had honored him so, Mutt's lovemaking had been chiefly of the gorilla art. He had twisted the arms of adoring young maidens with unspeakable dash; he had even got their attentions by slapping them stingingly on the buttocks. Their outcries seemed to him to bespeak their admiration for him in a stealthy but nonetheless unmistakable manner. His petting consisted of grabbing a girl's arms, watching her try to squirm

away from him, and looking with his inimitable devilish and irresistible glee straight into her dismayed eyes. He knew that all their seeming anguish and dismay were a subterfuge. He realized that they must adore him. By encircling a young thin neck with a stranglehold he was merely impressing the person to whom that neck belonged with his desirable maleness. O, who could resist him? Man, he was the stuff!

Now he loved to pretend that Jeanie was taming him. He glowed with famous struggle in the net of her hypnotic charms. He rarely was alone with her, he barely knew her, but in public they had many pace-setting scenes that kept other teen-agers on their mental tiptoes for pointers. Each privately rehearsed the part he or she would play with narcissistic fervor. And for Mutt the old bearhug stuff, the old slapstick teasing was gone forever. He was embarrassed by the memory. What could be more wonderful now than listening to malicious and sensation-craving young girls and boys chanting, "Kiss her, Mutt, kiss her. Ah, go on, why don't chu kiss her?" And then finally, as if merely to shut them up, saying "Aw, dry up why don't chu?" and nonchalantly strolling over to where she sat ostentatiously busy with all kinds of glamorous goings-on, and cutting into her group, and carelessly and masterfully kissing her, and then walking away leaving them roaring and shrilling with excitement and general approval?

The obsession with sex, which had been such a disease with Ethel in the days of her physical hurdle, was to Mutt a form of exhilaration, a new aggressiveness and source of egotism.

"And I am black, but O! my soul is white . . ."

One of those unique local incidents that happen everywhere, something people of the locality look back upon uneasily. One of those peculiar incidents that are the infrequent heritage of any one township and affect all that one township's people like a bloody trainwreck or the collapse of a central water tower.

It belongs specifically to Tupelo. Like Chicago's great fire to Chicago, San Francisco's earthquake to San Francisco, this event belongs to Tupelo. (And inconsequentially to the whole world.) It happened about this time.

The sun had not shown its brilliant nakedness through the atmosphere for weeks. The sky was like a swamp full of muck. The smells of the earth were vile, violent and voluptuous. Smells of moist clods, chicken dung from the chickenyard, and rotting leaves. Odors were not changed, never left the humid air. The weather was unsanitary. On "Nigger Hill" and across the tracks in the varmint section the outhouses perfumed their parts of town.

The duets of cats upon the gateposts and elsewhere consumed the late hours with songs of passion so intense that their only logical conclusion seemed to be murder instead of savage mating.

The rank earth was continuously wet. Clothes would not dry on the clothesline. Hustlers became sluggards. Emotions in general became amphibious. Heads ached and hearts hung heavy. Minds seemed

to mildew. It was a subtle psychological time of great flood. It made moist children wish vehemently for a time of great drought.

The boy Eddie was found in a cloven bank of a ditch, a gully, with his skull broken into by a heavy iron bar.

(The stimulation of working in the drugstore, of meeting all kinds of people day by day, of hearing about all kinds of experiences, had kept Mutt perpetually excited. It seemed that anything in the world could happen these days, might happen, and — Mutt fervently hoped, barbarian — would happen.)

When that morning Eddie was found lying face down in a gully with a cracked skull, the news was brought into the drugstore like an irrepressible flame of powerful issue. Mutt was quite stunned. No sorrow or joy clutched him, no emotion but a bafflement as to how he should behave. O, he knew not to rejoice, but he understood that he should become pale and mournful and perhaps shed a tear. After the first squeak he made ("Eddie? Dead? No kidding!"), he suddenly realized the role he must play as Eddie's co-worker, so he went around grimacing surlily, as if Eddie's death angered him, and once he managed to squeeze out a tear.

All day people came and went with long drawn faces, spasmodic sentences of horror and grief, melodramatic vehement talk about lynching the murderer if ever he could be found (but no one, not even Eddie's own mother, could ever suggest the murderer; it was simply the ghost of woe's handiwork, the eerie sigh), and the town hugely enjoyed its sensations of

awe and horror and fury. It gave the town a chance to unite in indignation and denunciation of a common enemy and in a headless aggressiveness. There was muffled thunder in their low quick conversations ("They found anything yet?" "No." "By golly, some dirty sneaking son-of-a-bitch . . .") and a sense of exultation in righteousness and power (through strength of number, brute force). And so, does war bring spiritual greatness?

People had died before in Tupelo, and, furthermore, people had been born. On an average of once a week the news of some new death of a town ancient or former resident reached Tupelo at large. In the past month Henny Harmon, who was sitting on the front porch, had dropped off, dead. Old Sue Duncan had et something that disagreed with her. Hiram Sneed finally died, he who had been living on half a kidney. To take their places, there were births, and there were also people who migrated to Tupelo and away, thin trickles of them.

But usually people lived with steady rhythms: the dreaming plodders, to whom death was yet a stranger and every death a conundrum. Each death was a shock to the senses of these sleepwalkers, these dreaming plodders, because they were their senses, and death was commonly supposed to be a state of permanent insensibility. Especially when the young died, a high school girl of leukemia, a tiny boy of diphtheria, especially then death was a curious blow. How should one take it? There is so much, it seems, to be lived.

So many people, suddenly rendered inutterably

dear by the abnormal finality of their absence, are dead. If only we could take a vote to establish a heaven after death where all would be known each to each, and each loved by all, then the world would have meaning. Then people would think, "Ah what's the use of all this earthly commotion, this brawling?" — and they would throw away all weapons, psychological and whatnot, perhaps. What a fellowship there would be, on earth as well as in heaven! The Christians are right, after all. Anyway, they're far better off than we skeptics are.

Back in the drugstore, at the prescription counter far in the back of the little building, Mutt listened to a haunted sailor tell of death as he knew it. It seemed that he had to tell it, now that he had a chance to purge himself of the dreadful secrecy that had poisoned his spirit. It was Silas Markham, his fingers fluttering over his eyes with the weary flutter of a bird coming at last to safety out of the storm: "We had a kid, a greenhorn, on board this last trip. O, God, if I never forget anything . . ." And with this prayer breathed between blanched lips, Silas rubbed his low wrinkled forehead with the back of a clenched hand and squinted, his eyes shut tight. "Kid got caught in the steam boiler, lost his head. The only way you kin git out of that place is from the inside, the inside, you gotta unlatch that panel from the inside. God, we had to listen to him. God. God. O God."

After the sailor was gone, his face burning as if he had fever, Mutt heard the prescription clerk, Martin Mooney, tell softly how he remembered the

First World War. He was a veteran. "I remember I saw my brother git killed. I didn't think I'd ever git over that. He screamed like a woman. I wished to hell it had been me." But at once the silverhaired man brightened up, as if this sober memorying had been a crime, a social crime. "Lord, I remember how raw my belly got, just from climbing around on them rocks."

Cepheus, the negro boy who worked for the jeweler across the street, Cepheus, perhaps more than a namesake of the longdead Ethiopian king, stood around in the drugstore waiting for a prescription to be filled for the obese jeweler. His dark pink-palmed hands were rammed deep into his pockets, his air was vague and somber ("as if he didn't have good sense"), his profound thoughts seemed too profound, idiotically profound, and his expression was enigmatic, inscrutable.

Mutt, moving about, polishing the little round tabletops or sweeping the floor with a longhandled pushbroom, more than once looked up and found Cepheus' strange stupid stare fixed on him. But Mutt didn't care what that "nigger" was thinking as long as he didn't bother Mutt.

In fact, Mutt was hardly aware that such a person as Cepheus existed. And why did Cepheus exist? The inscrutable dusky boy, the anonymous darky?

Mutt worked hard all day. The funeral would be the next day, and all the stores would close at ten o'clock in the morning for the sad wild occasion.

Mutt left the drugstore at six-thirty that evening. A damp furry wind flew into his face. The clouds

brooded in mass demonstration, thick over the magnolia trees and other trees and second-story housetops. There were dark lumps in the cloud and then lighter cloud surrounding the murky brown lumps, but nowhere did the evening sky show. The streets were like gorges, and the world seemed robbed of all its glorious hues: the terrestrial green had turned to gray.

And because he had a mind susceptible to dramatic fears, he imagined, he knew, he was as sure of it as of the fact that he was born, that someone was following him. He *knew* it. He once slung himself around savagely because he had even *felt* a hand or something, an object, hovering right over the nape of his neck. Finally he coud bear it no more. Again he slung himself around with a spontaneous little bellow. There was no one there, nothing. Then he began to run.

He had left his bicycle home with a flat tire. Without it he felt oddly bound, so dependent had he become upon its easy wheeling movement and rollicking speed. He missed the superior velocity, just as a man accustomed to a typewriter must feel when he finds he must write a letter without one, or a woman accustomed to an electric stove when she must cook with kerosene. Thus we progress.

"Hey, Bud, pipe the pedestrian! Hey, Son, whyn't you git you a airyplane?"

"Haw haw haw, hi, Mac. Fliver's laid up. Damned if I don't feel crippled. How about a lift to town? My laigs is all in, and I don't know as I could make it stumpin." How glad Mutt would have been if

one of his automobiled acquaintances had hove in sight.

The streets were as deserted as streets on the moon. Mutt began to feel so alarmed that sweat rolled down the sides of his face. It was so strange, this savage mood of naked sickening fear. He was not usually so nervous. All those stories he had heard. Maybe he was sick. Yes, maybe he had fever. He was afraid to walk in the street for fear an automobile would come cruising around the corner and men of a ferocious otherworld kind of breed would leap out and seize him before he could cry out and carry him off to kill him and dump him into the sea. Or perhaps they would just strike him dead on the spot, as someone had apparently struck Eddie dead. That was it. His imagination was playing on that theme. Mutt began to wonder feverishly if he had made any archenemies. He was afraid to hover over the streets. He was also just as afraid to walk on the zigzagging sidewalks past deeply weeded lots and hyperthyroid-like shrubs, past the lurking mouths of alleys. There were sporadic houses on either side of the streets, but their people were deep in their bosoms, and their yards were desolate of *human* beings.

He kept changing from the sidewalk trails to the street, to the sidewalk trail on the opposite side of the street, and then back to the street again, and finally to the initial trail. His vision took on a nightmarish quality. Time seemed leaden and still. He felt a premonition of death so vivid that he wanted to howl, "I don't want to die!" Gooseflesh chased up and down his spine with delicious coolness, icy fingers.

He almost died of sheer fright. And back of it all, like a master of puppets, was the very strange and evasive illusion, faint and vague and persistent, something he had not fully realized even when he had first experienced it, something he probably would never be able to express for the simple reason that he would never realize fully what it was.

It was a twilight awareness of a strange gaze from enigmatic inscrutable and presumably stupid eyes. An awareness that lingered with him from some experience he could not remember save as a stare somehow inhumanly cold and knowing. If he had kept pulling on his imagery, on his memories, by some train of association he might have half-realized what it was. It was right on top of him, almost, in time locality. (That morning. Cepheus' eyes.)

He reached home almost delirious, nervous as a cat. But eventually the naked droplight shone into the crevices of his soul with unwinking electrical glare, and the nearness of such flesh-and-blood critters as the firm-seeming young Hilliard and the fearless-looking Old Man soothed him back to his usual state of enviable equanimity.

A curious relationship existed between Mutt and the young Hilliard. Mutt was poor in English grammar, literature, mathematics, general science, history, and all the remainder of his school subjects without exception. Hilliard, who was well beyond his age in all phases of school work except athletics, surpassingly skilled as a reader, a symbolist, an expressionist, helped Mutt with his homework. In return for which service Mutt, the year around, not just

during school terms, helped Hilliard realize the peculiar kind of world Tupelo represented by sharing with Hilliard his experiences, by collecting all kinds of gossip to tell Hilliard, by chaperoning Hilliard whenever Hilliard felt a need to come to town. Because Mutt was loyal to his little brother, feeling an honest sentiment of love for him, and because Hilliard pitied Mutt, who was such a blind, deaf, and dumb little oaf, they made a beautiful harmony together, never fussing or fighting. And their self-discipline grew stronger, and a quality of tolerance in their souls also grew.

Night came with an epic quality, lasted until morning, and then fled stealthily, taking all its peculiar manias with it so that when the light came it overran the land, and only the shadows remained as debris of that terrible and silent battle between darkness and light, that savage massacre. The skies cleared the next morning, all golden and fine, and the vault of heaven was a virile blue, and like all blue, a symbol of mystery.

The funeral was one of the largest the town ever saw, cars on cars all lined up and following each other bumper to bumper in a long serpentine figure through the town.

People cried (it is not certain why they cried) and ate the cake of melancholy in general, and made it one of the most intellectual of all funerals, so full of conjecture. Mutt went and suffered in his new shoes, which were a sight too stiff and small. His pinched white face moved the Methodist Minister to put his kindly hand on the boy's tense shoulder.

"Son," he said sympathetically, "all things, in the long run, happen for the best."

"I got a blister on my heel where my shoe slides up and down," explained Mutt appealingly, his suffering mind on one track. The funeral ran its course, and everyone suffered. The Minister reminded everyone of the good in the boy, something that had been so submerged before this time, and people were remorseful who were not usually remorseful (except at funerals in the presence of a dead being's stunned and wretched relatives). Each held out as the center of his small universe, but sorrowed therein nevertheless.

After the Minister's soulcleansing solution was delivered and the last dramatics dramatized, people broke away from the cemetery and babbled together with renewed energy. Mrs. Busybody maintained that she distinctly remembered that blah had blah-blah and bosh, and she personally had blah. Old Sage So-and-So remembered that at such and such a time he had remarked this and that, and it had never been known to fail, not in his lifetime. Everyone had his conjecture, and his resolution mitigated somewhat the sting, the sore, of not-knowing. But the mystery was fomented all right. Since there *was* a solution to this riddle, why could it not be found?

"I'm doing everything a man possibly can," said the licentious old Sheriff in a mild huff, and he bit savagely on his plug of tobacco. Official duties irritated him no end.

Three nights later George Sorenson, known to his teen-age friends as El Slicko or Giorgio or even Geor-

gia (because of his dandified appearance, his obsession with glittering jewelry and bright silk ties) was murdered in his own backyard. Knifed. It was preposterous.

A peculiar fact about these incidents. None was ever published by any newspaper abroad, outside the county, outside of the little mimeographed Friday sheet of the *Tupelo Times,* in fact. If one of the murders had happened in one of the colossi of the North, in Boston, for example, it would have stood a fair chance of becoming nationally and even internationally known. And both of them together, the victims being youths sacrificed to the passion of some fiend, would have constituted a headline scream, perhaps. It would depend on the issues of the times.

Now the town was armed with its knowledge, and subsequently every stranger was suspect, and every theretofore harmless lunatic, and, because the murderer had shown considerable insight into the lives and habits of the two teen-age boys who were unfortunate enough to be victims, every man, woman, or child in town was suspect. Men warily eyed one another.

Boys were quizzed by groups of hawkeyed citizens to find out who had offended them and why and what had been done about it. But it was a futile gesture, fusillades fired into the ocean wave. (Who would ever know what, if anything, had been hit? So fruitless it seemed, so baffling and banal where an iron truth and profundity should have lain. Men kept thinking that the answer must be obvious, on the ends of their noses, but it seemed that only mirrors

were there on the tips of their noses, and when they seemed to have discovered a clue they bumped into themselves. Must start all over again.)

The Old Man arranged to come after Mutt when the drugstore closed on Saturday night, for that night was Saturday night, and the fiend might become unleashed again, might it not? Groups of armed men patrolled the streets. Teen-age boys observed a curfew by order of the mayor, could not be out after 7:30 unless accompanied by a grown man. All stores would close at 8:30 that Saturday night.

A man was coming down by train from Washington, announced the Sheriff proudly, a smile of triumph on his haggard old face. His duty was done.

The Old Man, stopping by the jewelry store to leave his "good" watch for repair, almost collided with an industrious young colored boy, who was dusting the counter. "Hey," said the Old Man in mild surprise, "Almost stepped on you, didn't I?" Cepheus just looked at him noncommittally and then resumed his energetic dusting, his tongue fat and pink caught between his open lips, his brown forehead puckered by his effort. The Old Man stepped on back to where the jeweler sat in an easy chair, philosophically looking on.

"I don't think an ape could be as stupid as that black boy of mine," remarked the jeweler in greeting, in even, fatalistic tones. The jeweler knew himself to be the cream of wisdom all wrapped up in his one fat body. "Awful about our boys, isn't it?" he continued. "Wouldn't be a bit surprised if one of these nigger monkeys isn't on the deal end."

The Old Man, who had worked with negroes and learned to love them in general and some of them a great deal, grunted tolerantly and gave the jeweler the little paper parcel in which he had wrapped his watch. "Fix this for me, will you?" he said briskly. "I think the mainspring is broken."

All afternoon people wore a mute expectancy that gave their lives immediate values they had forgotten. Suddenly life itself was dignified, and even food tasted more delicious than before. That most obvious human heritage, the body, was suddenly rescued from the shades, the background of the obvious, and sharply focused as something not so certain after all. The moral code, "Thou shalt not kill," had been violated. The outcome of this affair would determine whether or not "Thou shalt not kill" was a command or a bluff, and the people were determined that it should remain inviolate. Justice must be done, or people would literally and figuratively perish. Justice was a form of that "vision" without which "the people perish." (Justice is so often an elusive theme, its profile taking different shapes dependent on the position in which you are standing. You must keep moving, rotating around Justice, to get any accuracy of impression. But now, in Tupelo, Justice became quite one-dimensioned for the time.) Every person seemed intent only that the murderer be found and killed for his heinous behavior, the only disagreement being on how he should be disposed of, and every person seemed content to let the future take care of that, as it could not be definitely imagined that a human being was involved. It was a

maniac, they thought, and a maniac was not wholly responsible.

Saturday night came and went in a terrorized town, a town terrorized by its own imaginations. The night was unfathomably quiet and still. People came and went, knocking at one another's doorways to inquire, and frightening each other to death. The sky was like the vault of a tomb, the color of ink, and the little patrols behaved like parties of grave-robbers. Night lasted a little short of eternity, and dawn came grey and cold through the streets like a resurrection, a true Easter morning, and the dazzling sun made fear hide and memories seem absurd. Oh, this mad, mad world! People came out on the streets and laughed now, a little nervously at first and then wildly and loudly, laughter that kept their sense of defeat from stifling them.

"Haw, haw, haw, Mamie, was that you that let out that screech when I tapped on the windersill? Lawd, I thought it was a wildcat you kept in there!"

"Don't you jaw me, you stinking hyena. I know you, sneaking around like that there on purpose to scare people. You ain't fooling me."

(It was as if an ignorant people, after living through a meteoric shower, had been waiting for some poor prophet's proclaimed "End of the World," and had lived through the heraldry and the time stipulated for the heralded event and found it all a fluke, a fraud. Only instead of hanging the poor prophet, who had slipped away, vanished, perhaps, they laughed harshly, jeered at one another.)

Sunday night came, and boys who had boasted of

their fearlessness during the day became a little uneasy again, but Sunday night went as tranquilly as it had come. The town began to relax a little. "It's lak my William sez. 'Mama,' he sez, 'that murdrer ain't gonna show up around hyere zlongz we's yhere uhwaitin fer im. Eez gonna wait til we ain't watchin fer im. Eez smart. Ee knows tha ropes.' "

It was three weeks later that Mutt was going home at a time when darkness was diffusing itself throughout the area of light, and the little beads of street-lights had just popped on all down the line. It was late, but not too late: September light waned almost as soon as it had waxed clear and fat, it seemed. Mutt was thinking how he soon would be in school all day, and the thought itself was grueling. How glad he would be to be a man and free. Mutt pedaled along with slow doggedness, just as he would spin along through days at school. The mood possessed him quite utterly. O God, the crucifixions of youth.

At Siddons' lot, a big tangled square in the neighborhood, full of grapevines on tumbledown trellises and honeysuckle on rotting fences and Virginia creeper swelling up from the ground and ragweed vagrancy everywhere, plant monsters (shapes of brush that loomed up like weird moonmonsters in moonlight and sighed as if in league with the howling squealing denizens of the wind), at Siddons' lot, which was already losing its innocuous daylight meanings of botanical interest in the depravity of deserted dusk, Mutt absentmindedly and in obedience to the voice of his habit steered his bicycle into the diagonal trail. A shortcut home.

The Old Man, who had worried a little about the tardy Mutt, was standing at the opposite corner of the square lot, deliberating. If he, the Old Man, went down the back street, while Mutt rode up the far street, that would be the heck of a merry-go-round. On the other hand, if Mutt took yet another street, and he might well already have done that, *that* would be the heck of a note. The Old Man stood there, his weight on one leg, his thumbs caught in his pants pockets, and thought hard, his mind rapidly traveling a maze, going up one corridor and then down another. On still another hand, the Old Man reflected, he wasn't doing Mutt much good standing *here*.

At that moment, through a little valley in the brush, he caught sight of a shadowy figure moving up near the other mouth of the trail. He couldn't tell whether the figure was moving toward this corner of the lot or the opposite corner, but he thought it might be Mutt or someone who might have seen Mutt, so he watched and waited alertly. For an old man his eyesight was pretty keen.

Exactly forty-four seconds later there was a wild barbaric yell that reverberated in the air; it seemed that the air shook, and the Old Man, with a thundering pulse, went running square into the thicket where he had last seen movement. A strange form came hurtling out of the thicket howling like mad. It seemed to be headed straight for the Old Man, but it saw him just in time and swerved and went beyond him in the general direction of home. The Old Man put on his own brakes and then turned to make a

small survey. It was Mutt all right. It seemed that the Old Man could see a bloody gash on Mutt's calf where the pants-leg was rolled up so that it would not catch in the bicycle chain. He could be wrong about it of course. The Old Man did not try to stop the youth, who was slowing down near the end of the next block and bellowing to the first faint stars in the soft purple of evening. He was certain to rouse the town.

Meanwhile the Old Man hastened into the brush, his little eyes darting like the eyes of eagles, every sense alert. There was something in that lot, or perhaps escaped beyond by now. As the Old Man got to the big pine tree where Mutt's bicycle lay on its side, one pedal spinning with a quiet steady hum in the air, the other pedal rammed deep in the black earth, he slowed down.

It seemed that instantaneously he heard a shot from beyond the lot, somewhere in the general direction of town. He broke into a run again and came out upon the dusty shell road.

Now he heard shouts and cries, and down the street he saw people running, forms like insects flitting across the road. He saw a car stop, then reverse its movement until it reached the street corner it had glided beyond, and then turn off, visible no more.

Finally the Old Man found the little hive, the hubbub, in Cooper's alley. Ernie Elwood Barton stood with a gun beside the body of the young negro, Cepheus, which lay limp and dusky in a little heap, looking very much like a bundle of rags.

Ernie was barking orders frenziedly, as if trying

to vindicate himself for what would plague him like a crime whether it was just or no. Ernie was always a frenzied kind of person, acting on freakish impulses. It was perfectly plain to the Old Man what had happened. Ernie had been sitting on the porch of his house across from Siddons' lot and had seen Mutt enter the lot, heard Mutt's devilhounding yell, and had seen Cepheus flying out with a strange hunted-animal stealth. Ernie had stood up; the gun he was holding and cleaning in his lap clattered to the floor. Cepheus saw Ernie with dazed catastrophic sight, displayed the face of a demon paralyzed by its own guilt, and darted off in an entirely different direction from the one which he had planned to take, the one which would take him into the labyrinth of "Nigger Hill," where no negro would betray him. (Every negro would lie soberly and blithely somehow. "Cepheus, that boy of Ben Swade's? No, we ain't seen him. We ain't seen him in a long time. No, suh! Sure habmt.") This was the pay-off. Why had Cepheus gone so far to make this final and fatal move against all that he knew. Even as he made this magnificent blunder he knew he was making it. From then on he was mentally paralyzed, a poor hopeless cripple. Why had he ruined himself with this futile gesture when he might have saved his hide so well?

In each of the three murders this moment had come upon him when a powerful impulse to fly into the face of disaster had swayed him to and fro like a leaf, but in the other two times his exultation in success had been stronger, he had taken care, had clung to reason. But between this third and final mur-

der and the first two the water had flowed in catastrophic floods beneath the bridge. He lost the sense of beauty in savagery that had formerly been with him. He lost his feeling of superiority. He lost his self-control. His thoughts seemed to burst in his head, to dart wildly in all directions at once. It took him a long time to knit his nerves for this third murder; he had had to force himself, and finally, as he had suspected it would, it killed him.

Ernie chased the boy down as he might have chased some frantic wild hare caught through its own mistake, the decision made when in a moment of indecision it left the home ways as familiar to it as its own skin.

One look at the boy's dark skin was enough to decide the justice of the deed in the quick eyes of most excited "white" men (men burnt red in the face by the sun-blaze, men hairy and swart, men jaundiced and puffy, men of purplish pink pimples, men palely and pinkly tan). They knew that they *must* take the side of the impulsive Ernie. It was one of those race fights now, and only one side could win. That was the "white" man's side. The white man must always win. He can be benevolent, a benefactor, to "niggers" if it makes him feel good, but he can't "coddle" them, and he must always remember this: no matter what comes up, the "white" man must always win.

"Boy, that was a lucky shot," said Albert Kirvin, standing near-by.

Eventually even Mutt was brought up, still dazed and sobbing incontrollably. The Old Man started from his philosophic stupor, his preoccupation with

his own confusion, when he saw the boy, and swung quietly over to Mutt's side. Someone had wrapped a man's handkerchief — and it was flecked with dirty dried mucous — around the boy's leg. The Old Man grabbed the leg to investigate, and it was explained to him by two or three excited gabby people that it was only a scratch, as the Old Man soon saw himself. A scratch made when Mutt leapt from his bicycle. The old dexterity had stood Mutt in good stead. O, we never know how many odd bits of knowledge will prove pertinent to our lives, and will sometimes be fatal by absence.

Someone had found the icepick the negro boy had hurled at Mutt. It had whizzed by him into a bush beside the pine tree. It was now a vicious looking weapon, the homely icepick with DRINK COCA-COLA sprawled in red letters on its handle.

"Jiminy Cripes" and "Good Lord of Moses" were simultaneous comments by two fervid young observers. Boys ganged around Mutt to soothe him and to ask him naked and abrupt questions, like "How did it feel?" One fellow shouted to another, "Say, Pete! Howdja like t'git gigged by this here thing?"

The group around the dead negro youth was somehow more somber, more dumbstricken. What did he symbolize, exactly? A kind of life in death? No one was sure, and everybody was afraid. Yet no one could speak his fear; it was too great for him to fathom. So far only "white" people were present, and the boy was unmistakably a negro. Yet somehow the boy looked "white," or human, or divine. Something about the poor little carcass with its mutilated

head. At such a time not many of that distinct little group were thinking the cruel impossible "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" thoughts. The small remote elements of decency were, here and there, coming to the fore. What was there to think? How helpless men are.

But already a couple of small boys was whispering together over by Clancey's shed. In their excitement they took insidious pleasure in bloodchilling thoughts. "You reckon it could be a bunch of niggers like Murder, Inc.?" "Say, you know, you got something there. Jesus! You know I bet this ain't the only one!" Melodramatic smallboy thoughts.

The jeweler arrived by automobile, and when he saw the corpse he cursed softly in his selfpossessed manner. "My nigger, huh?" he said, as if he had owned that soul, and to give credit where credit is due, it is barely possible that he did in a way own that poor distorted soul. The jeweler stood with his hands hung on his fat hips and frowned and shook his head. Then he sauntered over to the most elegant group of young ladies present to pay his respects, for his soul was owned by the exquisite bodies of womanhood supreme. He flashed sparks to draw fire. This was his sublimest expression of himself. The limp body of a negro boy was a non-entity. This was a sophisticated man. He convulsed the ladies.

Then the Sheriff arrived with a tall well-made negro in faded jeans in tow. The Sheriff pushed the man ahead of him into the ever-swelling throng, still, strangely, not graced by negroes. This was the first negro (alive) present. A group of coarse women,

on seeing the worn dark face, broke into ferocious jeers, and one spat in his direction. But in general the milling throng was quiet.

When the negro arrived at the side of the corpse, he broke into wild weeping, weeping like a woman's weeping, and began to speak in a high tenor garbled by sobs, a wild high pleading with "the Lord."

The white people standing around, some with haughty contempt-hued faces, began to grow uneasy and some to walk away as if they could not bear anymore of the hideous spectacle, and their hearts burned. A few of them bitterly blamed the negro race for their vague wretchedness, but some were merely heavyhearted and morose from lack of simple emotional response, from confusion.

The Old Man knew the negro man, who, in fact, had worked for him, was not a bad fellow at all. The Old Man stepped up close. The negro became aware of the Old Man's intent face, began to direct all his remarks to him imploringly.

It would have flattered some men to be singled out this way as the king bee, the chief justice, the possible savior of a terrible situation. It weighed on the Old Man like many, many tons of worry, but he held himself erect and listened almost gently, for his sympathy was keen.

By that time the negro ambulance had arrived for the dead boy, and the crowd was dispersed in large measure. The Old Man and the Sheriff were hearing an odd story in the meanwhile. The Sheriff, who had been known to lash the faces of his negro captives in perverted efforts to force confessions, sometimes

leaving the scars of his watch-chain written on their faces, this same stupid and depraved Sheriff, this obscene man, was acting mean and threatening. He listened with an ugly leer, his lone long fang glistening yellowly against the cavern of his gawping mouth.

The Old Man saw his black looks and said quietly and in finality, "I wouldn't worry this man, Sheriff, if I was you. I know him. He's a good nigger."

And such was the Old Man's power over his fellow human beings (and such was his reputation in Tupelo) that the Sheriff detached himself from the negro and bothered him no more.

The negro was Ben Swade. No, Cepheus was not his son, but his brother's son.

The Human Heritage

Once upon a time, about fifty years ago in Tupelo, a gang of white highschool boys found that they could secure what they most wanted, after the problems of cigars and whiskey had been solved promiscuously and somewhat hazardously to their high-spirited satisfaction, by disregarding dull nice white girls and white prostitutes, some of whom were keen as hawks, too keen to be caught in the seductions of these "respectable" children at any rate, and by concentrating their ardor on negro prostitutes. Several of their number became diseased, luckily, and one distressed youth blabbed, so that soon the secret had leaked out all over town.

Mothers, with the huge blindspots of maternity, wept and whimpered that they didn't care, they knew

there were no black spots in the souls of their sons, it was all the fault of this or that one particular boy or of negro women in general.

This last accusation was, in a way, true. There is no beauty more alluring than dark beauty, once the frigid psychological wall of inhibition is broken through. Then there is warmth, like the African sun, the scorching blinding African sun. So these boys had discovered. And they thought of these negro women more or less as slaves, an unused harem, anyway. Vulgarity is greediness and condescension and carelessness and lazy selfishness. Vulgarity is a form of egotism, brute egotism. Some of these boys were far more vulgar than the "nigger" boys their age whom they intimidated with superior power and then jeered at from the naked little summits of their power.

They paid the negro women well, for they wanted all these secrets kept, and they treated them pretty well, for in these matters the dark women were far wiser than they. They came at night into the deserted spot on the hill above the old cemetery. The old spooky house under the great oak tree was all boarded up and bare-looking. Now on its hind steps a small red light, a lantern, squatted. This was the signal they knew.

There was one negro girl far more beautiful than all the rest, to their standardized way of thinking. Her skin was a smooth light chocolate, her features were small and fine, her neck was long and curving like a swan's, and she was intelligent in ways a white boy would never have expected a "nigger" to be. From the efficient old Madam (Aunt Sue), who

seemed to have the attitude that their behavior was merely zest for life and all in fun, the boys picked up dropped hints that the girl was with a tinge of "white," perhaps more than a tinge. Aunt Sue even went so far as to cackle, "You knows her Paw." But then Aunt Sue drew on the cloak of mystery she so delighted to wear. The girl was only sixteen.

The girl fell in love with one of the boys, the most adventurous and brilliant and yet somehow timid of the lot, a vigorous young male with a hidden depth of soul wherein resided an odd ingrown conscience that sometimes plagued him to death, a conscience that demanded beauty. He stood in the bare hallway, in the smoky light of a lantern, and he quaked with a conspirator's excitement, a blotto sense of rapture, and yet a cold restraint. He wanted a miracle of beauty that he could not foresee here, for he scorned these other negro women, not so much because he was prejudiced against the hue and texture of their skins, but because they seemed ugly and depraved. In the jaundiced light in the decrepit house he saw the boys with a novel sight. He included himself. They looked like depraved idiots. He felt disillusioned and sickly weary and caught in a trap. Why had he been so impulsive and come? Why did he do these mad rash things? No, he did not blame the other boys: he had persuaded himself. He had wanted to be alive. Life was rapidly becoming a sad disappointment. What could he do with himself to fulfill his life? (It was no longer what *would* he do. He recoiled in prudish disgust and dismay from a sense of power, and without a will for power, why should he live?)

Then he happened to see this girl in the back part of the old swaybacked gray aged haunted house that was the whorehouse, and she shone with warm live radiant dark beauty. Her head was bowed, her demeanor was of outraged modesty, and what he saw of her face was as of an Egyptian statue's grace and beauty — the Queen. One of the excited boys was dancing up and down with impatience, like a monkey on a string, hissing through the gloom, "Aw, come on, Conrad. Hurry up. It'll soon be time for us to go." And from some room deep in the house there was a warning whistle.

Now it was a matter of chivalry to choose that One and save her from insolence of the pack and he let her know that she could go free under his patronage if she liked. And because these two thwarted beings had a sense of honor (not because they lusted like dogs) and mutual trust, a ghost of beauty rose between them and hued their sight with rainbow beauty and made their days seem supremely profitable.

(In time he came to love her, and to talk to her as he never had to any other woman, or man either, and she listened with that undeserved liberalism of love. She seemed to him to sense his thoughts far in advance, before even he knew what they meant, and he told her in quiet wonder that she was the most brilliant person he had ever known — he said "most brilliant girl," but it was a slip of the tongue. He discovered that he had been lonely most of his life and he discovered that she had been lonely, and she saved him from loneliness with her alive beauty.)

When they ran her, along with the other negro women, out of town, often he thought of going to find her, and often as he sat in the midst of loudness he would get very distant and a light of sickness would come into his wide staring eyes. He died not long afterwards. He shot himself. It was hushed up in the town, whose negroes and whites both had risen up to punish their transgressors with both words and deeds, but one of the boys told about Julia, the saintly wench, the beautiful harlot he had so secretly adored.

O, hsst! It was so scandalous! And the venom his mother knew in her heart for all negro women was never abated. She died in a fierce shrewish hatred of "niggers." Like the adjective "jew," the label "nigger" had come to mean sins more awful than the ordinary human sins. There are people widespread over the world who use the names "jew" and "nigger" as taunts and jeers, to instigate fights, to reveal a mighty lust for power.

Julia went North carrying her unborn child and a sadness that no one could mitigate. She had lost the light of her life. When she gave birth to a very pale baby, a baby surpassingly fair, she wisely left it on the steps of a foundling home, saw the door open on it, and made her escape. Then she took up a career in a bawdyhouse in the great Northern city, became more and more indiscreet, doped herself, cared no whit whether she kept on breathing or died. She became syphilitic, eventually died, her beauty long spent. She had lived the lifeless remainder of her life like a ghoul.

But in the great impersonal Northern city her abandoned child grew and thrived because he was so beautiful. A colored woman who had known Julia on her arrival in the Northern city kept tabs on his progress, eventually let him see a letter Julia wrote her, a clear beautifully written letter that gave the name of an uncle and a brother down South. Even when he saw this kindly colored friend of Julia's he was so fair, so obviously a white boy, that he never guessed that his mother, his uncle, and his brother were black in that invisible sense of blackness. As he had never known his kinspeople, as they had shown no interest in him, at first he was too crushed by the knowledge that he was not wanted to make various moves to know them. He wanted someone.

As he grew he suffered more, muffled in loneliness, smothered by his isolation from the warm healthy liberty of family environments. Finally, when he was seventeen, he wrote a letter to his uncle in Tupelo. PLEASE FORWARD, he marked it carefully. He wrote another and another. He wrote his brother. He wrote and wrote, vainly, and with huge dry lumps making his throat ache, deep sobs tearing him internally while his eyes remained burningly dry. There was a gulf of torment inside him, a howling tempest-tossed gulf.

He grew; he matured quickly. At twenty he was as wise as an old man seasoned by defeat. He was extremely beautiful in a proud sensitive way. His face had a spiritual quality in its high narrow bones and fine taut muscles and beautiful tan skin. His hair

was black and fine. He kept it cropped short and bristly, for he despised curl.

He was grown very philosophic, and highly educated despite his meager measure of formal schooling, educated in spiritual ways if not so much in physics, magic symbols. Eventually he became a salesman for a large ladies'-underwear concern, where his cultured manner won him a large salary. Eventually he traveled South to Atlanta, Jacksonville, and Miami. It was a simple matter, he looked so fine and clean, for him to walk into Southern hotels, whose poor filthy janitors and washwomen were most of them so darkskinned and deprived-looking (and what is more repulsive than that which is pitiful and deprived-looking?). He sometimes flirted a little, goodhumoredly, with waitresses of peroxided fluffiness. Women "fell" for him with astonishing frequency.

He married a plump and pretty girl in Jacksonville. His love for her was genuine, and she found him a "perfect" husband: polite, domestic, urbane. He hired her a negro girl to help her with housework, and he hired a negro man to clean the yard every Tuesday.

Eventually he sired a fat and healthy child, a child both dark and beautiful. He loved it with tender passion, a musical passion of vast melodic beauties, rhythms. It loved to hear the steamers at night, the husky thrilling tones so abysmally deep and far away. It loved to listen to the sounds things made. He got it music-boxes, a little toy piano that played

an octave, and finally a victrola. To celebrate its third birthday he bought it a spinet.

He himself was beginning to grow stout and complacent, and sometimes as he sat contentedly beside the fire, patting the collie and smiling complacently, he wished someone would put a pistol to his head and pull the trigger. He wanted to die in his happiness.

Then the next year Margaret was in labor again. He was very tense, very nervous. He paced up and down the thick rug that sprawled on the highly polished floor. The clock ticked metallically, and he felt that the hand was abnormally slow. Internally, he thought, his organs were knotted by the convulsions of his psychic agony. Poor, poor Margaret. Poor, poor girl. Why had he done this to her? O he should be taken out and shot. How unspeakably brave women are, he thought.

But another kind of dread never entered his mind.

Finally the door from the hallway opened. It was Margaret's mother, just arrived from the hospital. She had entered through the backdoor, so quietly.

He stood up and turned to meet her. He was going to speak. But the words clove to his tongue. She had on her face a look of unspeakable dazed horror.

"What's the matter, Mother?" Pat said, his heart falling through eternity.

She looked at him dazed, uncomprehending, ages old. She snatched her hand away from him, and then, holding it as if it were now dirty, scuttled by.

For a moment he felt utterly stalemated by confusion. What had happened? The red glow of fear and horror was in him; the blood of his body rushed

like a cataract through his arteries and veins; his heart pounded like that of a man at the doorway with a lion crouched to spring from the sidewalk. Was Margaret dead? My God, what a huge obscene joke if she were, for if she was dead he was dead also. How many minutes had he been dead then? Ten? Twenty? Oh, that was impossible. With a convulsive little howl he rushed out of the house. He tugged at the door of his automobile with sticking-plaster fingers. Finally he wrenched it open and rammed himself under the wheel, bruising his ribs, turning his ankle, butting his head until it swam and the tears spurted out of his eyes; he even heard his shirt rip where it was caught in the slammed door. He threw the car into the driveway with convulsive motions. It seemed that he could not bother with driving in the streets anymore. He wanted to send the automobile flying through all those houses which lay so unconsciously smug in his way. By sheer will-power he managed to drive in the streets, but he almost wrecked the car eight times through sheer heedlessness, recklessness, skin-of-his-teeth maneuvers.

At the Hospital the nurse at the desk stared at him silently with perplexed and awed face, finally let him through. It was then that his flesh began to creep up and down his spine and his scalp to bristle as if all his hair stood on end, electrical flashes passing through his body.

He went to her room. They let him in wordlessly. He looked with nightmare vision at Margaret on the bed. She was still unconscious, pale and haggard,

the blue veins sweet in her eyelids, her mouth sweet like a relaxed rosebud, and her whole demeanor worn as a beloved old garment at last rescued from a hard struggle. But in these strange mad surroundings she was not his: she was an old familiar stranger, with the emphasis on the stranger.

He gazed at her silently, longingly. If only she would wake up and tell him. Wordlessly he kept pleading, "What is it, Margaret? What is it?"

He turned around. The nurse motioned him to follow her. In an isolated room he first saw his baby. Yes, as he looked it over carefully he knew there was no doubt. It was a little negro baby, tiny, black-skinned, a little smutted varmint.

He went toward the elevator. He went a little beyond the elevator and turned into the door that opened on the stairs. Apparently the nurse thought he had taken the elevator, for she came out of the room, shut the door, and padded nurselike down to the room where Margaret lay. Then abruptly he had a vision, as if the little components of the mathematical puzzle suddenly fell into a complete equation of their own accord. He tiptoed back through the doorway and down the silent hall. He thought his breathing must sound like a steamboiler; he kept his breath until he was blue in the face. He sweated profusely, like a glass of cold water in a warm room. He softly, softly, turned the doorhandle and pushed. He was too weak. It didn't seem to bulge. Now he tried to apply a little pressure, and the door fairly flew open: he had only a wild lost control over his muscles, his senses. He was a lunatic, it seemed. He plucked the

baby from the pallet on the bed. He tiptoed. Oh great Jehovah, he thought in anguish and panic, he must be making a noise like an elephant galloping. He slid into the stairway and slithered down the stairs, almost on his knees, for his knee-joints had turned to water and his lower legs seemed dangling and useless. He managed to make the lower hall, the ground floor, looked both ways, and fairly burst out the side door, almost upsetting the negro scrub-woman on the sidewalk. He stopped and apologized profusely. Tears of earnestness came into his eyes and streaked down his face in a sudden overflow. He wanted to tell her that she and he were sister and brother under this old law he had discovered newly.

Like a warning-gong the thought came to him that time was passing and the candle shortening, and that the old drama must work to a logical finish. He broke off, saluted the old bewildered woman (her mouth was working speechlessly — was it snuff?) with an old-fashioned bow, and ran to his automobile. He wrenched the door open and jammed himself in, laid the swaddled baby on the seat beside him, and concentrated on making the automobile move. He badly messed up the gear business, stalled once, shot off with a terrible lurch and a roar of exploding gravel.

He left the city of Jacksonville far behind him in no time flat, it seemed, and it was as he were rushing like a comet through vacuous space. All those severed influences sounded hoarse and shrill in the distance to his ears. Was this the world into which he had been born? He had lost all sense of time. It was a

dream, only a nightmare. How strange was this nightmare, this dreamed-up quandary. No, it was real, real! Illogical and real. How could it be? He wondered idly why it did not break, why the illusion did not let go. (And if it was real, life was not worth living.) Who was playing jokes on the world?

He caught sight of the forgotten baby. Was it real? No, it was not real. He could kill the baby somehow, he would, he must, he knew that. He reached over to feel of it. Oh, God, it was real, it was living and holy! His face fell smashed with disappointment and frustration.

The longer he drove, the more confused he became, the more impossible such a murder became. Perhaps the baby would die of its own accord, he thought with both hope and dread.

No. It could squirm and wail and breathe in bird-like fashion; it was still alive. He was somewhat astonished that it was such a hardy little varmint — astonished and filled with groans.

He took the road to Tupelo unwittingly. It was when he was almost at Tupelo that he suddenly remembered that this was his "home." With savage restraint and stiff quietness he inquired his way to Ben Swade's shack three miles beyond the town. He told them some wild tale about the baby being his servant girl's and the servant girl being the daughter of Julia, etc. He marveled at his startling ability to lie and his powerful persuasive presentation. He pulled out his wallet and gave Ben all the money he had. He did not even bother to count it, but Ben did later, and it was over sixty-six dollars. He handed

the money and the baby to Ben with an impulsive impatience Ben could not bring himself to resist. And then he turned with proud dignity and marched off down the little rutty path toward the road. He got into the front seat of the automobile and just sat there, marveling at the magnificent performance he had just finished, congratulating himself for the good deception, the necessary lie. And then he was gone in his big shiny automobile, and was never seen or heard of in Tupelo again.

Thus the infant Cepheus.

From the old crone who had long ago mothered Ben when Julia, Ben's mother, had abandoned him him, Cepheus since his infancy had heard that he was a white man's grandson and the grandson of a half-white woman. The old crone, who remembered Julia with hatred always — that contemptible whore, Julia, who had betrayed her race — the old crone taught little Cepheus many fine hatreds. She pointed out white boys and sniffed, "You is tha same ez they is." And cackling, "Whi' manz bleck bebby." Ben had threatened over and over again to run her out of his house "If yo doanuh be shu' up." Then she would take Cepheus aside with malicious glee and tell him that she had a fine idea that the white man who brought him here was really his father, and she would nod with a judicious far-seeing eye, rocking on her old haunches with a nervous energy. She had a fine imagination.

And because Cepheus grew repressed, coiled into himself, warped by these hatreds, and burningly egotistical, it was natural that he should behave as he

did, exceedingly natural. You will notice that his hatred was only for white boys his own age. Somehow they were the only ones important to Cepheus. They were the ones like whom he might have been.

But what would he have been like if he had never been told his origins?

On the Seamy Side of Life

In every year there is this weird season coming near the end of the calendar year, and a new fantastic kind of turmoil seizes the country, and a catering to tinsel and bright green and red and yellow and blue brilliants, a catering to symbols of gaiety and friendship, makes of the continents a shining sea, wherever the dazzling hand of Christmas is seen.

It is odd to behold the excitement, and to the Old Man it was often depressing. ("It was all right until they commercialized it," he growled.)

Was it the old farce to be enacted, or merely fantasia? Was it a time of great spirits abounding in playful abandonment, or a time of mean spirits trying to recall what greatness was? Was it the time of frenzied spirituality or a massive benediction for drunks?

It was at one time the most exciting and glorious, the saddest and most depressing time in the whole world. Wasn't it? It was an experience to be shared, it was stamped with the seal of social approval — and it was a time when vanity might run riot, beauty-reflecting beauties reflecting beauty reflecting beauties far far into the nights of the soul. Dancing and

drunkenness and loud jokes all bearing testimony to the improved sociability of the world. People bent on strenuous relaxations, on having a good time.

It was in the grumps who secretly did a little charity and felt their hearts wrenched asunder by the irony of all the multicolored celebration that the true spirit of Christmas resided. It was in the grouches who sneered at the pampered children busy breaking the plenty of toys they found under the big heavily ornamented trees. It was in great-big men who wept for children denied. It was sometimes a time of greatness, but greatness is invisible and inaudible and rare. Greatness is not in showcases. It is hidden far, deep, in men.

This Christmas in 1938 the Old Man was daring. He decided to make it the best Christmas the kids had ever known. He himself bought Ethel some expensive (in his sight) gloves, a purse, a compact, shoes, silk stockings, and a dress. He was tickled to death, thinking about it, imagining her surprise on Christmas morning. He bought Mutt a new suit. Then — this was the grand finale to his spending, because he had seen Hilliard trying to ride Mutt's bicycle — he bought Hilliard a new balloontired Elgin bicycle. O, how happy the Old Man was! He would chuckle over it at night in bed, to the discomfiture of the Old Woman. "You might have asked me," she said primly.

Christmas drew near, and despite themselves they all felt thrilled and exhilarated. The Old Woman got busy and scrubbed the floors and cleaned the walls of the rooms and worked until things shone. There was

a huge fat Rhode Island hen clucking with prima donna dignity in the coop. There were pies going in and out of the oven and several cakes laid away. Candy was in a big unwrapped package under the drainboard. Whee, the holidays were upon them. They all had one terrible shining desire in their minds, desire for Christmas Day. Christmas Eve was unbearable. It stretched out with endless elasticity far beyond the moderate evenings of other days.

On Christmas morning Hilliard was up and wide awake at one o'clock.

"Get back in bed," said Ethel angrily. How she dreaded the day now, her heart in her throat with fear for her expectations.

Hilliard went pattering all smiles and briskness out into the cold dark hall. "Can I get up now?" he called to the old folks.

"No," was the Old Man's muffled yell.

At seven o'clock, a more "decent" hour, they lined up according to their ages — Hilliard first, Mutt second, Ethel last — and were at last let into the room where the tree was.

When Mutt saw Hilliard's bicycle sitting up under the tree all shiny and balloontired, Mutt said, "I had to work to earn mine." And a mean look of resentment and rebellion danced in puckers on his face. This made Hilliard, little introvert, grieve. O, joy is as perishable as music.

Ethel, as usual, went off somewhere to cry bitterly. She had wanted so many things no one ever thought of giving her (she did not know what she wanted).

Her endless hunger. Would she ever, in this world, be happy?

The Old Man and the Old Woman were standing in the background, all ready and eager to mirror joy. Their joy was the children's joy.

Ethel picked up the compact with a look of the most abject misery. She put it down again, stood back and looked mournfully at the cheap little articles the Old Man had thought expensive, turned and slunk off toward the back of the house. She was all choked up with disappointment or something, emotional let-down of some obscure nature. Perhaps she had expected to find an angel father-lover sitting under the tree with an enormous sackful of security and a well of exquisite love. Poor little fifteen-year-old Ethel, awkward and chubby and not knowing what to do with herself.

Suddenly the Old Man felt so sick he really wondered if he was going to vomit; a sudden weariness overtook him and almost knocked him down. It was the look on Ethel's face that slapped him; it was Mutt's whine of envy that kicked him in his guts; it was Hilliard's little shoulderblades that slew him. Amen, then, to Christmas morning. The Old Man turned and lurched drunkenly out.

Ethel, as she went, saw the joy being killed on the Old Man's and the Old Woman's face. She realized that it would have only cost her a little generosity to have made a show of pleasure. She knew that the Old Man and the Old Woman would have gotten untold delight out of their delight. She knew that she

had murdered something unintentionally that would never live again. She had made the Old Man and the Old Woman fail where they had made a definite effort. They had had no defense. She had watched the looks of hurt and anxiety creep upon their faces, and she felt like crawling into a hole and dying. All she could do was hurt and be hurt. She ran out of the room, the air seeming hopelessly congested and the lump in her throat grown far too great. It would have to be removed through expensive surgery.

Hilliard seemed to appreciate his bicycle. "Thanks," he said over and over again to the Old Man and the Old Woman. "I sure do thank you. You shouldn't have done it." He sensed the glimmer of anxiety in the air, the weeping of spirits, and he anxiously worked to make joy to combat the horror.

He and Mutt went riding on their bicycles. "Shucks," said Mutt. "It don't even feel like Christmas."

"Yeah," said Hilliard bitterly. "But you and Ethel don't have to be so mean to Granddaddy and Grandmama. They try so hard and then you go and be so selfish. Poor old Granddaddy and Grandmama." And tears came into his eyes.

"Aw, shoot," said Mutt in disgust, but suddenly he felt considerably dampened. It was so very true.

Just then they saw a little barefoot girl run across the pavement on Main Street, a tiny ugly little rubber doll hugged to her breast. Watching her dance fleetly across the icy way and vanish running with little lithe movements into an alley, it was her little

face Hilliard saw, her little wanton human being, and he wanted nothing so much as unconsciousness, relief from the pain in him, at that moment.

It was about this time that Hilliard came to hate Christmas, when the so-called democracy became most undemocratic, when the inequality of man was never more obvious, when God left the earth to the silliness of the crowd of fools.

The Island Universes

The nights in the spring of 1939 fell with an epic quality of warm air and lightheadedness and sap swimming and voluptuous dreaming. The Samsonic day lost its locks to the beguiling Delilahlike night. A dark down hued her epidermis, but the male day, with its redheaded brilliance and reeking strength, was subdued by her, and her charms held the insects chirming and the moon in its golden mist dazzling and the dew condensing for what seemed like a slow evening madness.

It seemed that sluggards sat in the cockpits of authority throughout the land. Urgency was nowhere obvious. Yet tiny leaves rolled into spearpoints were thrust swiftly up through the ground, and everywhere the earth was bursting with stealthy revolution. In the soft balmy air the trees began to unfurl their tiny green banners, and human beings were lulled by myriad tiny shouts into a sense of rapture. Merciful nature changed their designation from winter maniacs to spring lunatics: their winter mania became spring lunacy.

Inside that low and narrow wooden edifice fastened like a leech to the earth and tricked out in electricity and plumbing and other queer manmade devices, the Old Man and the Old Woman sat in chairs and Ethel on the couch, each preoccupied with his or her very own affairs and all ignorant of the splendor of the world outside, the nightworld of the luscious sable wind, and now and then an intoxicated nightbird and the raucous sound, coming from the general direction of the highway running through town, of a truck shifting gears.

Inside the narrow lighted room the Old Man beat his way through the baffling dimensions of the newspaper. The Old Woman was sitting idle in the chair, rocking a little, and nursing a peeve of the day against Ethel. Ethel and the Old Woman were both burningly aware of each other and the status quo, held an angry and silent conference, the two of them glancing stealthily and balefully at each other every few minutes or so. Ethel cherished a plan for the following summer which she had just barely mentioned to the Old Woman, and now Ethel was uncomfortably and scornfully aware that she must be wary or the Old Woman would be the destroyer of her looming voyage of energy and delight. The Old Woman was indeed brooding on just such a plan.

Finally the Old Man put down his newspaper with a rusty yawn and, telling the Old Woman to bring the clock, toiled off to bed. It was eight-thirty. The Old Woman followed, plaiting her gray hair into one long braid down her back. Ethel was left alone in the sitting room with her sulky thoughts. She picked

up an old *Life* and idly looked through it, dwelling chiefly on the pictures of half-nude girls. She liked the voluptuous sizzling feeling naked flesh gave her, and she was fascinated by the blithe girls who posed for the pictures: they looked so sexually experienced. She herself was, if not fat, pudgy, and she envied these lissome creatures with all her heart. Besides, they were long, and she was short: that was the long and short of it. What would it be like to be long? About both *Life* and *Time* there was a raw and pungent vitality. People became notorious and earthy and dazzling and evil upon their pages. She even liked to read *Time;* the glib racy style gave her quite a "kick." And it was truly marvelous how informative these magazines were, full of sparkly incidentals, chock full of events and people. She read these magazines and dreamed. They both satisfied and stimulated her wanderlust.

The twelve-year-old Hilliard sat out on the back stoop alone and in the darkness and dreamed and dreamed. The "mournful little cuss," the mopey little abstractionist, looked up at the vast pool of heaven and saw it alive with swimming stars, diminished by the great spans of distance, but lucid and radiant. There was a veil of dust, a cloud of faint light, where the Milky Way sprawled outflung. Hilliard sat on the back steps and held a little conversation with the universe.

(O, Hilliard, what will come of you?) How grand were Hilliard's dreams.

Mysticism is a habit acquired in childhood, it is a childlike quality, a refutation of adult "wisdom,"

a retention of the wonder of discovery and exploration that a child knows so well.

Hilliard knew wonder again and again. An exuberant wonder, a precious sense of humility before glories. Yes, he was a mournful little cuss at twelve who worked at his own private enterprises (knew his own mind, inclinations) with a fury that spoke of a profound loneliness. In the middle of the night he might be seized by ideas about the workings of his universe. He always studied, no matter what he was doing. He was afraid of anything feminine, because it was strange to him, and yet he was dreadfully drawn to it. Because he felt an intellectual superiority to most of the little toughies his age and many of the bigger toughies, he had already well overdeveloped the intellectual arts at the expense of the social.

The past winter he had assumed an expensive habit of wandering a little at night. Just before bedtime he donned his coat and went out into the cold. Ethel tried to stop him often, laughed at him and said with stinging adroitness, "Silly." But he had to go. He was as obstinate as Mohammed's mountain. Only now he was aware that people, seeing him pass stealthily and consistently in the nights, might snicker and sneer. That is what Ethel had done to him, he decided with ugly fury. It was an expensive habit, costing him peace of mind and Ethel her peace of mind also, for his preoccupations and trances made her feel so empty and alone. She wanted him to love her and be her companion.

The search to find himself — bigoted little soul — led him into the courses of abstractionism. He

had daytime diversions — meteorology, some physics ("Why is the sky so blue?"), botany, etc. He kept little caterpillars in glass jars, fantastic little creatures with furry tufts, orange and black dots on green, rabbit's-foot bodies, etc. He loved to listen to their champing on leaves, the tiny click-click of their tiny jaws, their browsing. He hid in the alley to watch the snaky birds chat and quarrel. He played curious little games with the Old Man's cat to see how it might react. One day he saw how many different kinds of leaves he could collect and learned their names and separated them into his own groups.

But his walks at nights gave him a "Now I lay me" feeling to go to sleep with. They gave him rapture after the squalid days of humdrum and mechanical human relations. Astronomy was the queen of all sciences, thought Hilliard. It was like music and paintings. Space! O, what a gigantic concept. Island universes, nebulae seen on edge, blue and green and orange suns, gases and planets and meteors — O, how beautiful! *O, how beautiful!* He raked lawns and delivered dodgers (grocery-store advertisements) and thus earned books by sweat and blisters, books filled with astronomical chat and photographs. He memorized the photographs out of borrowed books, and he turned the library topsyturvy in his ardent quest. Old magazines were scrutinized one by one and every one.

But the sensations he knew on his night walks, they "beat all." That winter he knew many winters. The tinsel winter of glassy exteriors and crystalline stars. The bright metallic winter, when the thunders

of the wind and the sweeping rhythms of the trees (Quaker shakers) made the world moaning and hollow like a drum, buffeted, and the sand kicked up and driven along the beaches like Vandal hordes set on plunder.

And then one night the full moon rising like an immense red carbon copy of the earth seen from a distance, fatuous, yet serenely strange and eerie. The old "beautiful stranger," teetering just above a pink and red plain of clouds.

He knew all this and more, and worshiped in gratitude and wonder, and despite all that he paid in running up alleys to avoid meeting people who might snicker or snort, or in burying himself deep in his collar and ignoring them wretchedly, he was frequently ecstatic.

O, little moonboy, becalmed in a moonbeam, wake up. "The Moon is Dead."

Wake to what? The mean vicious harried gritty and grimy existence of "ordinary" social living. The frayed nerves, the dishwater grease, the poverty of mind, the stringent thoughts, the absurd waggery of social religions, the varmints with their slurs and smears, their feeble wills stalemated by whims and whines, the vomit minds of people. . . .

You see, it was too late. Hilliard had scooted beyond the practical world into his own private abstractionism. He had already found that friendships meant prisons for his imagination, that is, for his own peculiar imagination. Therefore he discouraged the ready offers of friendship that many people, both young and old, made him.

Prisons of Friendship

Do you like to watch people make fools of themselves? From your elevations and boxes and tiers, superior beings, look down with amusement at the varmints. Wearing your scarves of superb detachment, you may perhaps be moved to toss a posy of pity and tolerance of the *laissez faire* sort. Poohpooh and hohum.

Well, look out. Two of the varmints have decided to relinquish their varmintship. Any time now they may leave their vulgar setting and come leaping and scrambling into your box to sit beside you.

How æsthetic were Hilliard's dreams. How he hated to hear small talk. How often he wanted to scream, "Shut up" to Tupelo pests. He became like a hermit, living almost entirely aloof from Tupelo. His Grandmama would say, as if it were a vital fact, "Wur going ti have some blackeyed peas fer dinner," and he would want to chime, "Shut up." Ethel might snap blackly, "Get off my paper, dern you. O now look. Look what you've done. You've broke the point off my pencil." "O, shut up," prayed Hilliard inside himself. Mutt would come in, all panting and eager, from a tussle in the grass with some playful puppy. He would draw back his arm and make as if he were going to slug Hilliard. He would make a lightning dab. Mutt had a strong instinct for play. Hilliard would grin nervously and flush. Then he would snarl, "Aw, cut it out." He lived two lives, of which the imaginary was much the stronger.

He and Ethel each lived two sets of lives. Perhaps

Mutt had developed an imaginary life too, for he also was concerned with a future. The difference was that Ethel and Hilliard daydreamed extensively, hopefully envisioned barren prospects as bizarre fortunes rushing toward them, but never lost their sense of insecurity, their doubts, their trembling in fear. Mutt was always optimistic, his crazy world full of flourishes. Where Ethel and Hilliard trembled craven, Mutt was grinning with genuine bravado. He met the future with a joke on his lips.

O, how exasperated Ethel got with Mutt. The difference between Ethel and Hilliard was that Ethel pitied herself and swore venomous vengeance on a world that didn't want her: she blamed the world. Hilliard blamed himself for all his neuroticism. He dragged himself as a fox terrier drags an old banged-up ragdoll over the ground; he dragged himself bleeding through his days, punching himself on the chin, kicking himself brutally with a persistent determination to take everything on himself and finally to master his destiny. Soft and malleable on the outside, he had an amazingly hard interior, whereas Ethel was belligerent on the outside and soft and cobwebby inside. These were the overall tendencies.

Mutt was unwitting master of every situation. He never budged from his remarkable self-assured pose except in rare instances of stress and confusion. He was liked and likable by persons of all breeds and ages. Ethel had only two girl friends, the Mirabella girls, girls who ate garlic and thought simple unabashed thoughts and were friendly as if they had

never been taught to be otherwise. Secretly Ethel despised them, but she needed them, she used them like crutches for her ego, and with them she experienced life as a social phenomenon.

In the next block south from the Old Man's house there moved to live an amazing family of Georgia Crackers, the McWilliamses. They were so countrified you couldn't shake a stick at them, the Old Man said (lest they run to the bushes), but he said it with good humor, because he honestly found them appealing.

There was Paw, a man tall as a beanpole and about as thin and narrow, but he was "honest as the day is long," "wouldn't harm a mosquito," etc., etc. He had an amazing fund of corny wit of the tit-for-tat variety. He called his wife the Battlewagon and liked to tell her, before a sizable assembly, "Why you and me is the same as two people, ain't we?" Or, "You fer me and me fer me."

His wife, Cornelia, was as fine a specimen of corn-fed Georgian womanhood as could be found anywhere: big bones, good fair skin, auburn hair and small coppery freckles, huge bundles of feet. She was as kind as a mother to everyone, no matter whom, and her laughter pealed loud and clear.

Lucky McWilliams children.

Because the Old Man liked the elder McWilliams so much, he and the Old Woman were constantly promoting friendship between their trio and the McWilliams children.

Now Hilliard and Ethel sneered at these kind people. They held them in the same regard as they

might clowns and other funny-paper characters. They weren't intentionally snobbish about it. They merely joked about the typical McWilliams behavior. Hilliard and Ethel were merely too sophisticated to presume that these country bumpkins were actual people. (There is no snobbery more terrible.)

Take the boy Merton's sore throats. They giggled nervously whenever they saw him spit, he had such a curious nasty way of putting his fingers like pincers over his nose and shooting the snot out his nostrils, then wiping his fingers on his pants leg. His speech was full of the "ih" sound. "Tin cint" for "ten cents." "Hit only cost me tin cint," he would say. He measured beauty by the cost.

And the girl, Doris, was such a good cook and seamstress she sometimes made Ethel feel envious. But so hopelessly and goodnaturedly ignorant. She was always trying to be helpful and to liven up the environment with her flat thick sense of humor, country sauce.

The two smaller children, Hilda and Ben, were bad and bludgeoning in their youthful stupidity. Snubnosed, freckled, stout, and solid on their feet. Not one iota of the gazelle about them.

These clumsy "Crackers" were pet jokes with Hilliard and Ethel. Mutt took the McWilliamses' part, sometimes with anger. "Well, he cain't help it," Mutt stormed when they began mimicking Merton and his colds. "That's just the way he is." (Sometimes Mutt was the wisest of them all.)

When the Old Man asked Hilliard why he refused to go with the rest of the family over to the

McWilliams house one Saturday night, Hilliard replied, unintentionally scowling, so nervous and embarrassed was he, "Well, I-I don't have anything in common with those people."

"Why ain't you?" purred the Old Man, as sweet as a rattlesnake.

Hilliard balked at the answering, stood around gawkily, his head bowed down, while they stomped and scuffled about preparing to depart. He saw the Old Man's side to the argument, but he remained adamant. It would be better to be honest, in the long run, he consoled himself.

Ethel looked at him with grumpy approval. She sometimes wished she had Hilliard's brave open honesty.

Before he left the house the Old Man took Hilliard aside. "Do you know," said the Old Man, his soft tones loaded with TNT, "you might be a lot better off if you put those books aside and came with us tonight. I ain't got anything against books, but there's a time and place for everything. You gon find that that ain't life," he continued, pointing to the books. "I suspect that most of them books are written by men who are just naturally under-lived and over-educated. They contain a lot of wistful thinking, but they ain't the real thing. Now, this is my own personal opinion, of course, and I ain't forcing you to do anything, but I have an idee that you're just naturally harming yourself by sticking to these to the exclusion of normal living like other folks," said the Old Man, suddenly dropping the shield, the mask, and giving the young Hilliard a good look at what

the Old Man was really like. "But I seen some of the fine things they done for people not as fortunate in some ways as they are. I saw Mr. McWilliams give — not lend, but give — that boy who broke his leg last week and lost his job, I saw McWilliams give that boy a twenty-dollar bill for groceries for his wife and kids. I seen him give those people who live in that terrible old shack by Singletary's, I seen him give them the side of a cow. I seen him give a nigger one of his good coats cause he thought the nigger was cold. And your Grandmama never goes to see Mrs. McWilliams but what she gets wind of some good Mrs. McWilliams is doing. O, they don't talk, and you'd never know if you weren't around them a lot, but for kindness of heart they can't be beat, and I got a mind to think that they is about the most elegant people I know."

So the Old Man and the Old Woman and Mutt and Ethel went trundling over the shell road to the McWilliams house, and that night they sat on the plump red sofa in front of the bright blue curtains and dangled their feet on the green and yellow flowered linoleum and popped popcorn over a roaring red and yellow fire and roasted apples and pulled taffy and talked loudly a great deal of the time and told tall stories —

— while Hilliard sat alone in the drab backroom and read a book until he was so blue that all looked black, and the bats of his ambition beat loudly and wildly on the closed steel doors of his inexperience.

The Old Man's Doomsday

Yes, Mutt was a boy ordinarily filled with joy. He was relaxed most of the time (he relaxed strenuously, and seemed bound to become one of those codgers you read about who live to be one hundred and more years old and attribute their longevity to chewing tobacco). Mutt seemed bound to live forever because his nerves were so free of fret and fray.

His sister Ethel worried about him earnestly, thinking how silly and spineless like a jellyfish he was because he liked to bum around the house and bum around town and was so sloppy now in his dress.

The truth was, Mutt had a deep and devout and loutish sense of organic well-being and a desire to make harmony with the bumptious world. Ethel was another kind of person altogether. Ethel was diseased; her vision was malignant, her thoughts were profane. She envied and she hated, and she wanted Mutt to hate and envy too, for, poor thing, she thought that hate and envy signified intellectual and moral profundity.

Ethel harped on him until she drove him out of the house or into the bathroom, where he was granted undisputed sanctuary, but he merely whimpered a bit and emerged buoyantly. "Oh, you fool," thought Ethel.

The time was coming, and it could not be put off, the time was coming when this family of misfits, held together under a common head by the autumnal strength and spiritual wholeness of the Old Man, must explode, permitting the former children to ex-

pand into the world with adult grace and the Old Man and the Old Woman to lose their utility once and for all, to linger only a while as spectators again. It was the amazing phenomenon of growth, of evolution, of passage and transition, that made this prediction a certain fact. Already something stirred in Ethel, a rebellion, a powerful pull of forces to get her into the world, beset with new motives, to send her on to her separate destiny.

Mutt worked at the Delbert Grocery Store now during the afternoons after school and on Saturdays until one o'clock Sunday morning. The grocery store paid more than the drugstore had. He was promised an assistant managership for the following summer if he stuck it out. Thus was Mutt also expanding into the ocean currents.

On Saturday nights he got home at about ten o'clock for supper. He usually brought his supper with him in cans or paper parcels and asked Ethel to prepare it for him while he washed up at the lavatory. Once he brought a couple of steaks. "Cook these up fer me, will ya?" he said out of the side of his mouth (a new affectation, the side-of-his-mouth speech) to Ethel, who was sitting on the sofa ferreting out the sexy spots in *Anthony Adverse* with the eager sniffing of an amorous fox terrier, made ugly by her puritanical horror and fear of the animal ways.

She closed the book quickly, guiltily. "Where on earth did you get those?" she said, bugeyed.

"Now let's not be asking nosey questions," he bantered, and then he looked at her with a quizzical

smile, as if to say, "You know I'm teasing, don't you?"

He came back from the lavatory rubbing his clean palms together with satisfaction and anticipations of good things. She wanted to know what was going on downtown, in that torrid zone of excitement. Saturday night always seemed like such a rowdy festive time in Tupelo.

"Oh, a lot of fellers getting plastered," he said easily, and with an intention to shock her, "and a whole caboodle of loose women getting fellers. Whadayawanta know for?" he asked with an airy playful ferocity.

Hilliard loomed up suddenly in the back doorway. "Hey, you old gumshoe," hailed Mutt. "I didn't see you out there. Wanna piece of my meat?" No, Hilliard didn't think he did, thank you, mumblemumble. He opened the screendoor quietly, padded on back into the house. Immediately afterward the little black ogre of a cat appeared at the screendoor.

"I reckon he was conversing with old Tom here," said Mutt speculatively. The cat bit savagely into its outstretched haunches for active fleas. A sizzling steak was plopped onto Mutt's plate. "I don't reckon there is any sauce," he declared angrily. Then he went back to ruminating about Hilliard. "He sure is a queer crank. You'd think he'd get lonely, sticking to himself the way he does."

"Who? Hilliard?" said Ethel with a strained sick smile. She thought distractedly, "If you only knew how lonely I am! But no one guesses. No one cares.

Perhaps everyone is lonely. Everyone except Mutt," she thought, and she suddenly looked at him hard in disbelief.

(If she had had intellectual pretensions she might have asked herself how it was that people were so lonely, and whether it was good or not, and how it could be cured, and all that.)

"Who'd you think? Old Tom, here?" said Mutt as if in disgust at her adagio perceptiveness, but really he didn't mean anything at all, just banter, any loose end of talk to fill up a crack of silence. Mutt's talk was for smiles and lightheartedness. He scorned morbidity in any form.

But he had suddenly opened a great wound in Ethel. She stood before the other steak sizzling in the open pan, and a flood of plural emotion about Hilliard and about life and things, great habitual generalizations out of her own poignant loneliness, came and stuck like a glue in her mind.

She always welcomed Mutt's affectionate demands, but she thought that his affection was thoughtless and without depth of feeling, and now she wished she didn't have to cook his steaks. She turned her wandering attention to the stove again. A wealth of flowing smoke was coming from the frying pan.

At the same time Mutt woke up to it. "Hey," he shouted indignantly. She got flurried, poked the meat savagely with the fork, managed to lift it precariously into the air — and dropped it into the next day's beef stew.

Mutt looked at her a long moment with bafflement, cynicism, and exasperation. "Out of the frying pan

into the stew, huh?" he sneered scornfully. Then as she burst into tears he patted her clumsily on the shoulder and said, "Oh, hit's all right, Eh-uhl!" (He purposely omitted the "t" consonant in imitation of the Brooklynese he had overheard hashed by a former Brooklynite, only he was unaware of the strange pronunciation's origins and significance — just sounds in the day.) "Hit's all right, Eh-uhl. I fruhgives yuh freely."

Then he grew indulgently wistful, and yet gentle. "Ah me, oh well," he said with another bogus accent, a take-off on the ultra folks. "Ah well, these little thingies, they will happen to the very best of us, you know," he said with bright benevolence and unctuousness. He hunched his shoulders and grimaced delicately. ("Anything for a laugh.") "Let's see what new things you can think of to do to some old bacon now, hummm?"

It was only the next day at the Sunday dinner-table that Ethel made free with her theatrics. She began by making sneering remarks about this "one-horse" town. "This town is deader than Death Valley, and it isn't half as interesting." She became downright belligerent, her lip big and loose with insolence, a pout distorting her lower jaw with a puffy ugliness.

There was a purpose behind her squall. Mutt paved her way by suggesting that she go somewhere else then.

"I am," she announced grandly and fierily.

Hilliard interrupted his daydreaming demeanor to ask in innocent surprise, "When?"

"This summer," said Ethel with nervous vehement haste.

"With whom, pray tell?" said Mutt easily.

"With the Mirabella girls," said Ethel proudly to conceal her feeling of abasement, her embarrassment.

"Now Ethel," began the Old Man rather mildly, as if he wanted to reason things out with her, trying to quell this mutiny with commonsense.

"I'm going to New York with them this summer," she asserted, stiffening, her lip trembling, her voice breathless.

"Who said so?" asked the Old Man in a quiet thick voice, the first sign he gave of the terrible hurt that was in him, the hurt because she had turned on him, who had tried so long and hard and in vain to win her trust and to make her happy.

"Well, why cain't I go?" she suddenly began to blubber, too nervous to restrain the excess of emotion, her lip turning outward involuntarily and swelling bulbously and squeezing against her chin. She looked and acted like a child with her intense emotional overflow and her ruptured face. "Why cain't I go? It's just for three weeks before school starts again. O, please let me go!" And she began to weep hysterically, the tears falling thicker and faster, rivulets of tears, and she rose from the table. She went into the next room where she could be heard bawling as if her heart was breaking right in two.

The people left sitting at the table found that their appetites had deserted them along with Ethel.

They sat emptily looking at each other and into the walls. The clock ticked unkindly loud. Someone should have told it to shut up.

In her childish weeping she had an unfair advantage. A man who weeps piteously before a firing squad is much more moving and discomfiting, seems much more innocent and helpless, a victim of circumstances. Surely a man who can weep is not too powerful and calloused to live. Only perverts can enjoy accusing and disciplining men who weep. Weeping, especially in adults, is often the sound of a breaking spirit.

If the Old Man tried to argue with her the situation only got more hopelessly ugly. "You stay home this summer," he promised desperately, rashly, "and I'll get you anything you want. You just name it."

"But there's nothing to do around here," howled Ethel. "Please let me go. Please! I gotta go." She wept freely.

"Now what ails you, Ethel?" fumbled the Old Man in his soft low grieving and pleading voice. "I'll see that you get to college when you graduate next year."

"I don't want to go to college," gulped Ethel rebelliously obstinate, though the idea was new and almost inviting to her. But no, she decided, she was tired of wasting her time studying that archaic trash in schools kept like museums.

"Well, I'll send you to business school, or anywhere," promised the Old Man. Then he began to fume, "I don't know these Mirabella girls. I guess they must be all right, but you never can tell. Know-

ing their origins, I kind of think you wouldn't get too much out of this trip. I may be wrong, I know, and it was mighty nice of them girls to ask you to go along, I ain't saying that they ain't nice, but Ethel, you ain't never been away from home before, and New York is a mighty big place, and s'pose something was to happen: s'pose somebody got hold of you and locked you up someplace — why, we'd never know what happened to you. Personally I think it's silly of them girls to want to go off by themselves like that. They act kinda addled anyway. I wish you'd tell em you cain't go and put an end to it. If they wuss to get swallowed up in that city nobody would ever find em. And they's some mighty mean people in this world."

With this parting shot the Old Man silenced his cannon and made a strategic retreat, figuring he had given her something to "chew on."

Hilliard stood in the next room listening (it could be heard all over the house), dry-eyed but miserable. He hated to see people wrought up in a tug-of-war like this one. He kept thinking, "Aw, Ethel, why don't you mind Granddaddy?" and "Aw, Granddaddy, if she wants to go so badly, why not let her go?"

Thus the war between Ethel and the Old Man began, and it lasted up to the very week of the departure, the last week in August. Then finally, in a fit of despondency, suddenly the Old Man surrendered, wearily announced his defeat. It happened as he prepared to leave the house after dinner one day. He got outside the door, turned around and retraced his

steps. "Ethel," he said, "if you feel like you just got to go, well, go ahead. But remember, I wish you wouldn't."

He waited haggardly for her answer, with a wild hope that she would still obey his wishes, that she had just been stubborn out of meanness.

"Oh, Grandfather," she cried in a transport of joy, "thank you. Thank you. Thank you!" She planted a wild wet smack of a kiss on his cheek. He stepped back as if he had been stung. She went in a sort of primitive ballet through the house and out the front door, bound for the Mirabella house to tell the good news, too exuberant to heed her grandfather's broken-faced exit, too triumphant to care.

By the time she reached the Mirabella house, her excitement had cooled off somewhat. The truth was that she secretly hated those girls. Usually she impatiently shucked each moment spent with them and viewed with vexation the monumental heap of ears-of-time to be shucked before her uses of them were ended.

They were so good, so unsuspicious, so kind-hearted.

God, they were eating garlic. Looking at them she felt shame for them, their bologna, their greasy complexions (a swartness), their garlic breaths. Everytime Martha opened her mouth the gaseous garlic expelled buoyantly. Garlic zephyr, willynilly?

Their generosity was a beating her bruised sensibilities must welcome. She told them, and they were glad.

She went down to the bank and withdrew all of

her savings for her lifetime of years. She had forty-two dollars. They left one morning early. Ethel was full of doubts, regrets, and fears. Sitting in the back seat she had time to contemplate her impetuosity, and of course she wondered why on earth she was going on this journey, and she could hardly believe that it was true and that they were moving up the planet in their insect automobile, but soon her bafflement passed away as more and more new scenes flashed in view. Soon she knew that everything would be all right and that this was the education she had waited her lifetime for. She was alert and amazingly self-possessed. It was the new Ethel being born, she felt. She felt a new freedom and power, and she had tool-friends and forty-two dollars in her bag.

Ethel's Odyssey

Then she was the wanderer Schubert and Heller and Robert Louis Stevenson had known, the spiritual vagrant who found in the kaleidoscope of travel the kind of amusement that is a bandage to spirit wounds. This summer pilgrimage was the climax of her life. Beyond it there could be no climax, only a long gradual decline into the well of years.

Her eyes were like mouths, devouring everything. Because this was the time when her dreams were being split asunder and her great delusions cracked, her gaze was like a windingsheet. Her rhapsodic attention was a disease eating a disease. With each new revelation an old idol was laid away in a shroud.

On the narrow highways of the South the car

moved ceaselessly northward. The heat was a blight upon the land, and the land was already blighted to the nth degree. Hot Southern towns rose and fell on the horizon. The physical earth was all that was real, and it brooded; the climate was an insipid conversation. Savannah was like a gust of hell. Cross-country through South Carolina, the filthy sordid tourist camps, the preponderance of poverty and the Southern illusion, the sensuous heat moving pantherwise — Ethel was carsick.

On the long narrow barren highway three automobiles with Florida license plates found themselves in unintentional caravan, played tag with each other, frolicked with mad enormity alone under the red sun of South Carolina. Ooga ooga. Beep beep. Blate blate. It was almost with sadness that gradually they lost one another.

"I shall always remember that little white schoolhouse sitting atop that red clay bank," thought Ethel. "I shall always remember the luminous green forest. I shall always remember that view of the streets of Columbus. I shall always remember that scene in the little roadside tavern where I saw the good-looking Armenian who had sense of humor enough to giggle in dealing out enough pennies to cover the cost of his coffee. I shall always remember this . . . that . . . this . . . and this . . . these deathless songs."

With each new scene, and before she felt torn from each foreign grip, she felt an unspeakable poignancy in silence, a tiny and enormous ache at leaving, a sickening desire to bury herself in the

warmth and art of each new scene. Each new scene was like a bouquet. Ethel had the bug.

She would always remember the old hotel by the railroad. She felt as if she needed a bath, a terrible greasy feeling and offensive body odors, a feeling of nastiness and irritability. They stopped late in the black foreign night. There was a little clerk jangling keys and grabbing up her heavy old suitcase and a blackheaded young man running behind him saying, "Hey, Ben, are you wearing your truss?"

There were chatterboxes in the restaurants in Richmond, and a fruity little blonde sold her a package of chewing-gum. There was a beautiful broad superhighway leading away from the ugly monster of a city toward the capital of the United States.

It was in Washington she saw one of those lean blond men who move with cougarlike grace and have pugnoses, one of those greyhound men, men of unique intelligence.

Washington was overdecorated, she thought. The memorials seemed to cancel one another. It was all too familiar from the picturebooks. Washington was a postage stamp.

And again in Maryland she saw another "Dew Drop Inn." A tree shaped like an elephant in some miscellaneous landscape. A restroom of as obscene a filth and stench as those which decked the South. The jukebox playing the old queasy schmaltz, one record with a tenor yelping while a bass played with a rich steel-wire sound. Toll bridges. A sleek and naked looking hip under a shiny jersey dress.

She would never forget New York, the great

steaming monster of a metropolis hot and throbbing in the night. This was might and material, this metal wonderland. Each road and bridge and tunnel she passed over and through clicked an unforgettable photograph for her albums. They were hers. She knew them with pride.

The city, the metropolis, where the eye-duets take place a million every split second. The metal tower of Babel, a thousand kinds of tongues making their strange noises. Everywhere she looked she met the eyes, and she saw solo so many beautiful young men that she dreamed of being some kind of supernatural being who loved each individually and was loved by them all. The powerful physical-emotional stimulus of the city, of New York, that Colossus whose gray delineations can be espied by the demons on the moon — like a tracery in the dust.

Had she ever lived in a small incredibly provincial town named Tupelo, that town which wore blinders such as a horse wears and refused to recognize the rest of the United States as part of its world?

There were some beautiful negroes, their dark faces shining with spirit and intelligence, suffering and inward-dwellingness having given them dignity, nobility, beauty beyond our beauty. There was that beautiful young sturdy blond cop in the immaculate dark blue uniform, tweeting sturdily on his whistle and waving his white-gloved hands like an impressario from his podium: oh, how lovely he was! There were the rich bluebloods passing in long black limousines driven by pokerfaced chauffeurs, the insipid chinadoll girls sitting back in veils and richlook-

ing fabrics, pretty emptyfaced girls, pale and pensive, while their gushing overdressed mothers prattled and prattled beside them. There were the ageless Chinese with their taut masks of faces, so enigmatic to us, eyes that moved apart from their faces, and ears that seemed to hear everything and betray nothing.

There were businessmen, all of them poised and important-looking, in handsome dark suits and sport suits, their faces rich-looking, with keen-edged eyes in their bold careful faces. There were haughty women trapped in the griddles of their girdles, flimsy stockings pulled up just over their knees and attached to the streamers on their girdles, tripping by on the sidewalks on their stilting high heels, and looking like insects in their outrageous hats.

There was a vast materialism.

Fabulous America! Land of Jim Preble and J. E. Stoolfire, S. S. Cooperider, Jan Skrpski, M. Poult, and E. E. Legg. Where are you McClish, Freye, Naselrood, and Vitale? Where are our good friends Buccellato and Kitch and LeDuc? What ever happened to Zlutnick, Flook, and Swank, Richard Maloof and Weberg, C. O. Fiers and Xandress? Who eats in Chooman's Restaurant or purchases squabs at Skeel's Squab Farm? Where are Tommy Ho and Chin Poy, Lung Fat and Ah Yee? Where are Booker T. Washington Johnson and Joe Louis Elwood? Where are the different Bachs and Brooks, Schwarzes and Blacks, Stieglitzes and Birds?

We have grown cold, like a museum, and static at home. We have forgotten the brotherhood, without which we are doomed, and our nation will surely die.

Hilliard's May

While Ethel was gone, Hilliard added fuel to the Old Man's hotseat, made his own revolution of a kind.

The day after Ethel left, the house seemed somehow strange. Ethel had never spent the night away from home before. Hilliard woke after the Old Man had left the house. A mighty squawking and flapping in the regions of the chickenyard bore witness to the activity of the Old Woman.

Hilliard lay with vague consciousness, his slumbrous body immense, and, like Prometheus, bound, bound by the bedclothes and its own inertia.

Psychically, the very act of waking brought crises as he dragged himself through hellish irrationalities into wakefulness. He got to know himself better through his gradual debut into full consciousness. In the gap between sleep and full consciousness there was that vividly hued and tarnished and neurile child whom he recognized as himself, as if for a moment he recaptured part of his childhood. He often wondered what would happen if he never really woke, never attained full consciousness again, but lived back in this mythical wonderworld of child-understanding he passed through as he woke. Then he was fully awake, the ratiocinating monster of the mature day, but it puzzled him mightily. Which was he?

Hilliard looked over at Mutt. Mutt was still sound asleep, his head thrown back, his mouth noisily open. Mutt straddled his pillow as if he were riding it, his

legs angled like a swastika. Hilliard felt as if he were looking at a complete stranger. After all, who was Mutt? Hilliard didn't know. He could not even imagine what it was like to be Mutt. Why was he born Hilliard? Why should God create anything so irrational and absurd? What was the Creator? Lord, what an unfathomable world!

Hilliard heard the Old Man returning, coughing and spitting. He always went for the mail early Sunday morning like this. Through the window Hilliard could see white clouds asail in a blue sky. The air was almost golden with haze. Birds were shrilly twittering.

Already Hilliard felt the heat. He felt sweaty and feeble. He flung himself out of the bed violently in defiance against the climate, and groped for some underclothes in a drawer. But he withdrew his hand in thought. Suddenly he seemed to know that this was the time when he should rebel, now, while the household was shaken by Ethel's absence.

It was time for his rebellion against the Baptist Church.

At 9:45 they all were ready, or almost ready, except him. He lounged around in his bedroom in his droopy drawers and made a strenuous effort to look relaxed and nonchalant. He wore his droopy drawers so that if the Old Man kicked up too big a fuss he would have only to draw on his pants and shirt to be ready. He hoped that the Old Man would take his rebellion effortlessly, tolerantly. He dreaded, deep inside the little quivering sac of him, any large emotional upheaval, just as much as sometimes,

conversely, he yearned for some large emotional upheaval to lend value to his days.

Mutt pattered into the bedroom barefoot, his newly polished shoes hung on two fingers of his right hand. "You ready?" asked Mutt a little curiously.

"Oh, I ain't going to church," said Hilliard carelessly, and yet with elaborate grandeur of self-possession, proof of his inward uneasiness. He never said "ain't" except when he was trying to appear relaxed.

His would be the magnificence of open warfare.

"You better get ready," said Mutt with an evil leer as he sat down on the edge of the bed so as better to put on his shoes.

"I don't believe in the Baptist Church," said Hilliard taking a firm grip on himself. He lay down on his back across the bed, hung his head down off the other side until the blood rushed to it in bluish pink hue, radish color, against which his teeth seemed pearly white (they usually did not). He pulled himself up to a sitting posture without using his hands, an interesting and pleasant effort.

Hilliard was just turning male. His forehead bulged beautifully, his cheeks were high and delicately molded, his face was narrow and sensitive-looking, his mouth was fine and full, and his nose was awry just enough to give him a grotesque beauty unlike most. He was somewhat conscious of his beauty, and despised himself because he was conscious of it. He was a very self-conscious person. He was growing tall and awkward. He was rather sturdy. His hair was brown and unruly.

Mutt had just continued leering as he drew out the slack in his shoestrings, damn him, so that Hilliard felt compelled to continue his explanation.

"Baptists are just as bad as Catholics. I mean, about the ritual part. They prescribe to the old rituals just as much as Catholics, but they don't realize it. It's just in a less obvious form. All that organizational bosh, standards of excellence, gold stars, and things. All those tense tearful people, always creating scenes, showing off their anxieties and martyred holiness, talking about good and seldom doing it, wallowing in their self-glory, phtttt. Don't you misunderstand me," he threatened, getting quite excited, forgetful of all save his crusade. "Christ was a great teacher. That is, a man teaches himself, but Jesus was a great man and he made men want to learn. His religion was dynamic. The religion since his time had been static and non-creative and ritualistic most of the time. Christ did not believe in the power of idols. Ritualism is a form of idolatry."

(Always there was that final suspicion lurking in the back of Hilliard's mind that he himself did not know what he was talking about. That was why he was likely to think that other people did not know what they were talking about, for he confused himself with them.)

"But what I'm really getting at," continued Hilliard, off on another tack, "is that while the Bible is a truly great piece of literature, a truly great social document, other religions also have produced great social doctrines. You ask a Mohammedan, a Hindu, about God."

While Hilliard stared at Mutt earnestly and unseeingly, spouting off at a great rate, Mutt had tied his shoes, stood up, brushed off his pants, and was now ready to depart. He opened the door. The Old Man was standing right there before the door, in the hall. He had heard every word.

When the door opened the Old Man tramped off. "Ain't he a caution?" growled the Old Man, never once looking back, and he snatched his hat off the halltree and took the front steps.

Hilliard almost changed his mind and went, but he didn't. He felt very glum and queer.

At dinnertime he came to the dinner table and sat down as if he had performed his regular routine. Nothing was said. The Old Man slouched to the table in the cooler clothes he had changed to as soon as he got home; the others he had left dripping on a chair in his bedroom.

They sat with a scraping of chairs and the Old Man droned, "Hilliard, say the blessing."

Each head was automatically politely tipped toward the plates, and an insipid beam of piety crossed the Old Woman's face.

Hilliard took a tight grip on his chair-seat with both hands, became rigid with mental effort. "I can't," said Hilliard very quietly.

"Mutt," said the Old Man, as quietly.

"Father, we thank Thee for the food, and for our loving Brotherhood; keep us and guide us through our days; may we be Thine always. Amen," muttered Mutt in a singsong way.

"Pass the bread," said the Old Man. "Krupkrup.

Pass the butter." And he chewed vigorously on a piece of raw carrot.

During Mutt's Godless prayer, Hilliard had kept his eyes up and open and on keel, his neck stiff, but now his eyes began to blur and twitch nervously. He was very hot. He felt tense and jerky all over; he felt quite ill at ease. He longed for a quarrel or something similar to relieve his tension just as much as he longed for a thunderstorm to break the dead heat of windless days. He felt so conspicuous (and a little guilty) that he longed to run and hide.

"Why couldn't you pray?" asked the Old Woman mildly and a little uncertainly, on foreign ground.

"I don't believe in God," said Hilliard loudly. The words seemed to pound the air, to ring the silences, he thought — or else his bones were exceedingly resonant today.

Then the Old Man muttered calmly and contemptuously, "You're a misguided little fool." Not another word was spoken throughout the meal. No one seemed hungry. The food tasted like glue. It wadded in their throats.

Yet all the time Hilliard was acutely aware that the only kind of person he found it possible to admire and genuinely love was the kind with the strong, the religious, inner life.

Ethel Comes Home

There was no doubt about it, when material culture was considered, New York had a surplus. (I want to warn you about novelists. They make trivia

inspiring and the most momentous events seem trivial. They are mental usurers, perjurers, plagiarists, and maniacs besides. Never trust a novelist. He or she will pollute your soul. Spend your evenings alone in solitude and prayer.) But there were never so many savages on the street at once. Human beings torn by savage forces, forced by the powerful stimuli into hurried harried savage surface living. Elsewhere men might pause and issue force of their own perhaps, but only those beings born and bred to the city, those beings who have a genius for city life, would seem to stand a chance of developing whole in the city.

(We are like pylons in deep and shallow water. We can see the tops of each other, and sometimes a distorted vision of the stalks in the water, but never the roots. Some of us seem to be more like lightships, mostly visible, buoyant, while others of us — the abstractionists — are like icebergs, mostly huge and below surface. It seems to the countrybred author that citydwellers are more likely in the long run to remain on the surface of the seas. If this is not a true deduction, it conveys a common enough fallacy in the thinking of the self-righteous hillbillies and sharecroppers and other commoners of the South.)

As time wore on, the spell of novelty wore off. When Ethel walked around in New York she held herself in a pose of dignity, eyelids shielding her, quietness bringing her a youthful glamour. Mysterious young *femme fatale*. But all the while her shrinking soul was crying aloud to her in protest at the pretense, and while she steeled herself to create an

appearance, the crater inside her grew. Helpless young animal, sometimes splendid despite herself.

But soon the pressures of male eyes, eyes expressing sex, the curious lamplike luminosity, became repugnant to her. Soon the city, a great pasteboard set, Hollywood style, became empty to her. It rained one night, and the lights mirrored in the wet a terrible fraud, and she saw the shiny splotchy slick world of moon-edifices, craters built of steel, to be a world of cages — and in these cages not human animals but amœbae slithered, for it was a microscopic humanity. Thus Ethel's illusion, and she wanted to go home.

She dreaded the endless journey back through the South again. The squalid South, land of meally cornbread and greasy fat meats and a limp juicy lump of collard greens. Land of heat and decay and sumptuous sensuality, such as animals enjoy, and slow laborers and empty horizons. She dreaded the chains of tedium. But even more than the diseased belly of the South she dreaded a self-imposed exile in the North. It was too brisk and inscrutable and incredibly wealthy and yet somehow culturally poor (to her Southern way of thinking). She felt poky and poor-folksy here. She wanted to go home.

On the journey home she quarreled snappishly with the Mirabella girls. They were all weary from being keyed up so long, and were taut with fatigue. The automobile was largely silent, save for the motor's growl. They endured three flat tires.

Ethel swore to herself that if ever she got home she would never speak to the Mirabella girls again.

In her silences she dreamed of seeing the Old Man

and the Old Woman again and of begging them for forgiveness. For the first time she felt that her monolith of prejudice against the Old Man's home had crumbled away. She had freed herself of shackles and fetters that had made her life hell on earth. At last she was coming down the home stretch. It had taken this escape, this voluntary period of exile, to make her realize that what she most wanted was all the time in her own back yard. It was a platitude come true. In her defeat she found the living Victory.

Before this time she had liked to think that no one understood her, but it was she who had never understood anyone else. How full the world is of people wanting to be loved, and how few are truly loving. O, sitting back in the rear seat alone, Ethel had plenty of time to think with remorse of what she had been. She had a new faith speaking up inside her: give, give until it hurts. Prodigious generosity is the natural extravagance of a healthy soul. Generosity is a miracle-well that constantly renews itself. How often do people board themselves up, the old-maid souls, the bachelor spirits, fruitless miser-minds and stingy souls. Such people are an abomination to all mankind. The churches may harbor them, the towns spread themselves out like carpets for them to wipe their feet upon, but none of the true beauty comes to fulfillment in their shriveled hearts. May they parch in the hells of their own making — and they do make teeming hells.

Finally and reluctantly Ethel admitted to herself that generosity is not exclusive, and she made peace again with the Mirabella girls, a quiet soft peace

with humility, a big step forward, and as usual they were friendly and forgiving. They said that they knew she was tired and that they certainly were sorry. She saw that it was she who had made the quarrel. They could not make mean thoughts.

When finally, that hot September afternoon, they drove up in front of the Old Man's tiny house, she cried with excitement and thanksgiving. Only then did she realize how much she had been homesick.

She left her bag in the street and ran into the little house (and how shrunken it seemed now) and threw her arms around the Old Woman. Then she saw the Old Man behind her and turned to throw her arms around him, but she saw by the hard look on his face that she must not. He looked as if he might break down into tears, but he kept a stony face, he did not soften. He shook hands. Thus he greeted her grudgingly. He could not forget his hurt. How tiny and weak he seemed. She saw now that he was old. She understood. She had broken her smiling image in his heart. She suffered because of his bewildered resentment, but she told herself resolutely that she had earned this pain and that she must try to earn her way back into his unrestrained affection. Her old persecution complex was vented into true sacrifice and martyrdom, and consequently, and amazingly, a spiritual richness and rare joy she had never even dreamed of before.

The Old Woman, who greeted her with a new kindness born of the Old Woman's thoughtful remorse for the vulgar past, thought she perceived something new in Ethel's attitude.

In the kitchen the Old Woman told the Old Man quietly that she thought this excursion had been perhaps just what the child had needed: an opportunity to see what the world was really made of. The Old Man grunted with a piggish meanness. "Well, now," said the Old Woman slowly and contemptuously in one of her rare aggressions against him, "you can just cut out that sulking. The child's had the trip and it done her good. You ain't acting right. The Good Lord says we oughter forgive."

"The good Lord means well," drawled the Old Man sulkily, hurt by this attack on his principles. (The old boar was secretly squealing, the barb in his flank.)

"Why, why, why you oughter be ashamed of yerself," blazed the Old Woman, and she flounced out of the room with an indignant finality that stumped the Old Man. He sat down in an old rocker and bemused himself. The truth was, he was terribly smitten with shame. He hung his head sheepishly, studied his toes, threw up his little bald head recklessly, and said with a great deal of the old judiciousness he had had, "Old feller," like a summons to the bar of justice, and then like a curse, "you just ain't worth a purple damn."

Mutt and Hilliard both teased Ethel a great deal about her "crazy" journey, and both secretly had mighty burning desires to do likewise. Whenever Hilliard got wrought up at home he swore to himself that he someday would make the journey and find a true home out there and never come back, no, nevermore.

Ethel took their little taunts meekly. They soon observed that her new open humility was genuine, and both were ashamed. Both came to love her again with a new tenderness because she had a new sweetness, thoughtfulness, rare and self-effacing. She never opened her lips to jeer and jibe again. Sometimes she smiled a wispy little tortured smile at one of Mutt's follies, but there was nothing sly and mean about her sense of humor any more. She was like a new person.

Her only touchy spot was her corpulence. She considered her little rolls of flesh obscene, and she moaned about them. Mutt did not help her peace of mind any by teasing her merrily, calling her "Tubby" or "Fatso." Hilliard once goodnaturedly added that she reminded him of one of those Chinese Buddhas you saw in pictures. She was not really so very fat, only pudgy and bighipped and largebreasted, but she had it fixed in her mind that she was, and she put the illusion in other people's feeble minds by her insistence upon voicing it. When no one was looking she skipped a meal. People were not prone to watch her eating habits, so it was fairly easy to do without. At first she knew terrible pangs of hunger, and the saliva fairly poured through its marvelous tiny ducts into the mysterious small cavern of her mouth. But she swallowed the excess saliva and exercised her new patience, an excellent example of mind over matter.

Meanwhile she was going to school and really making friends for the first time. She was so modest and quietly amiable that people could hardly refrain from liking her. She saw only the good in them, she

did not gossip maliciously, and she was always willing to help out. She became one of the most popular girls in high school with both sexes and all ages. Sometimes, looking backward, she shuddered with nausea and horror to think what a non-budging little clod she had formerly been: blurting, bumbling, eternally embarrassed. Now more and more this dark ovum of realization was coming to fruition within her, this peace coming with exhaustion and defeat, this new security born of the very quintessence of insecurity. Peace rising like a delicate butterfly out of the very dung of humility.

As time careened on, the Old Man melted down and the Old Woman and he and Ethel became so strongly knit together that you could not have hacked one free without killing the other two. They were Siamese triplets, almost. They were of infinite patience with one another, and each stealthily tried to make life easier for the other two, so that these three became positively saintly. The compromisers. As the Old Woman was likely to croon, "It do beat all."

Discarded completely was the old manner: "You got to toot your own horn or nobody hears you."

Mutt and Hilliard were both influenced, somewhat unwillingly. Mutt simply did not fathom the spirit behind all the milk-and-honey manners. Hilliard kept his old skepticism, had a rude eyebrow lifted dubiously, was somewhat more calloused, found the situation somewhat stupidly strange, the love too blind and flabby for his crabby little abstract mind. But despite himself he had a powerful undercurrent of respect for the three participants sweeping through

him and undermining his "scientific" pessimism with sentiment.

September, October, and November went by, and there was no change in this soulful situation. Here was a strange persistence. Even the regular cycle of human moods, which wheeled to and fro between each individual's melancholy-fatigue and exuberance-energy, did not meddle with the goodwill that existed in this family group.

December and the yearly season of spiritual richness (abnormal richness), when people change from the ogres and drudges they like to pretend that fear and misfortune have made them to shining wizards and hustlers, as if heaven had lowered to earth for them just a tiny while. Christmas came. The Old Man and the Old Woman and Ethel did not feel that they could at last lose themselves in a round of drunken saintliness: they had been acting like saints all along. Christmas did not make much difference this year, except that they all did a lot of talking about how fortunate they were and how they did hope that other people were as fortunate, etc. They all went to church.

Spring came, and Ethel was thinking that the Old Woman, whom she had formerly despised, was one of the greatest individuals she had ever known, and to each other they became great, and they were great.

Ethel was noticeably weak. No longer had she appetite at all. Food nauseated her. She had to force herself to eat a bare minimum. She had lost her animal nudging and nuzzling for lost and spectral oats (her nomad soul) in worn sacks and found that a

substantial soul visited itself upon her anyway, but it also seemed as if she no longer had the old energy with which she had pursued the phantom ideals. She felt very worn and burdened by the simplest events of the days. It took all the moral power she could summon to keep her saintliness. But she did it.

The Old Man and the Old Woman were much worried about her. The Old Man kept on drawing her aside and huskily pleading with her to go see the doctor, but she kept smiling weakly and saying that she was not really sick. The Old Woman did not believe in doctors, but she timidly added her plea to the Old Man's. Ethel kept putting it off, putting it off. No man had touched the naked trunk of her body since she was a mere baby, and she shrank from physical contact with anyone at all. Her body was the sacred shrine. She writhed with shame at the very thought of her ugly body, now grown repulsively sallow and hollowed.

She was very ill.

The weekend before the highschool ceremonies, her graduation, she was too weak to climb the front door steps. It had finally come to this. She started off to school that Friday morning. She barely made two blocks toward the schoolhouse before the knowledge came to her that she must go back. If she kept on toward the schoolhouse she might become unconscious in Siddons' lot. She turned around and slowly inched her way homeward. When she got through the front gate she collapsed on the front steps. There she rested for awhile and then climbed painfully up on her hands and knees and crawled to the door,

where she cried out in a weak breathless listless voice for the Old Woman to come help her. She was without passion of any kind. She was almost without life. No thoughts came through the cloud of her mind except the desire for rest and security.

They rushed her in an ambulance to Custanooga.

The doctor said that it was the worst form of pernicious anemia, leukemia. Her blood was almost as pale as water, a pale pink stain. She remained in a coma for three days, and died.

Life and Death

During Ethel's lifetime she had meant very little indeed: merely another presence to be remarked and tolerated and petted and pitied and usually ignored, and yet finally loved. What was this love she gave and took? A physicist might have called it a force disciplined for and by forces, a force capable of extension and suspension in varying degrees. A modern poet might have called it a form of defeat and subsequent formal surrender to convention. A sociologist might have called it the realization that social harmony is the basis for human life. A Christian might call it the human heritage, the knowledge of God, the concession of human impotence to the Omnipotence. Surely it was all of these and more too. This love we know is the sum of intelligence and wisdom. We do not need to reduce our bodies to sex or to hormones and enzymes to understand it, though our wisdom is increased by any knowledge, but we must do our utmost to understand the world in which

we live. This is what should be taught in the schools and in the churches and in the homes. Ethel, in her neuroticism, *was* deeper than Mutt, just as she had formerly thought, but had not been quite certain, for Ethel finally did her utmost to realize the good life — in her tensions racked her soul. Mutt is the question put humanity. Mutt seldom questioned. No, it is true, he was not taught to question. A psychologist would have been delighted with Mutt's healthy response to life. But it was lazy and effortless and, finally, stupid.

In death and to her family Ethel became a powerful abstraction. They remembered how she had always fought to live and how hard she had found living, and at first they could not believe that she had died, and they could not believe, finally, that she had lived.

"Why couldn't it have been me taken?" mourned the Old Man.

The Old Man and the Old Woman were becoming like two aged children. All the time they had been shriveling up — shrinking and hunching and paunching, the poky old people, whose legs now were far apart, their walk a jolting jot and their whole lives tenuous and unsteady. They courted death at every time, were twilight people, lived in an afterglow. Yet Ethel's death, instead of killing their spirits, gave them a new strength and elasticity. The rest of their lives was more or less a memorial to her. They made a conscious effort to be more charitable than ever before. They were very great people, these little unknowns.

You have seen old black women who looked like chimpanzees and old white women who looked like pussycats and old yellowed men who looked like maps in clay and old red women who looked like freakish frogs. Well, the Old Man and the Old Woman were beginning to belong to the zoo themselves. Who would live to remember their greatness, these ancient cranks who had once long ago been glorious and growing tissue like the rosebuds unfurling now on a low bush out in the moist and spongy earth? (While they were rosebuds they were making and rectifying errors.) They had known enough beauty, spirituality, to pay for their lives, and they did not want to be remembered. "Jest so I die and no scandal attached to my name," the Old Woman murmured drowsily one night as she sat in a corner behind the old kitchen stove.

The Old Man's one driving ambition was to be useful up to the very day he died. Useful to anyone who had good need of him.

Now that Ethel was dead, Hilliard and Mutt each felt responsible for the comfort and well-being of the Old Woman and the Old Man, only Mutt never let his responsibility be more to him than a few tweaks and twinges.

Hilliard spent nights lying awake pondering. Frequently an obsession he had came to light in his dreams. He dreamed one night that the Old Man sat in a rockingchair, a younger Old Man with black brows and thinning dark hair, the Old Man Hilliard had seen in old photographs, old tintypes. As the Old Man sat there looking at Hilliard with strange

sparkly alert and brilliant eyes, his head suddenly shrank rapidly until it was no bigger than one of those heads preserved by headhunters. It lost its dark hair and its black brows turned white in the shrinking. Then when his head had ceased shrinking there was a little pause, and the trunk of the Old Man's body suddenly shrank in the same way until it was in proportion to the head, dwarfed, and there in the rockingchair sat a little ventriloquist's dummy in the image of the Old Man. It all happened in Hilliard's gaping sight. It was terrible, and its echo remained in Hilliard's mind like a shriek, coupled with the feeling of helplessness and stupidity he had known as he had watched the contractions.

(At the time Hilliard himself was shooting up, growing, expanding lengthwise if not sidewise. Perhaps it was natural that they seemed to be so rapidly shrinking, the Old Folks.)

Now Hilliard was beginning to see how seedy, how shabby, and yet how unspeakably divine, this home had been which they had helped make for him. While other people elsewhere might be beginning to realize what a hideous old hag was the old petticoat who had mothered them, and the old sot was already shorn of his divinity, Hilliard could only wonder sadly and yet gratefully how it had happened that the Old Man and the Old Woman were his and he theirs, the Old Man's and the Old Woman's. "I've been lucky indeed," he thought as he looked around him.

O, he and they and Mutt had seen so much together!

And Ethel. "O, Ethel," he thought stunningly, "where are you?" Did she ever live?

The Genius

The public school was low and long, a brick building covering two city blocks. The architectural conception was of a rectangular box of fiery rouge-brick enlivened by white cement gargoyles and leaf designs over doors and windows. The halls were long and brownly dark, the rooms as similar as pattycakes, with blackboards on their inner walls and windows on the outer and desks regimented in the interim. There was chalkdust like flour spread thickly on the floors beside the blackboards and tiny light bulbs, luminous beads, threading the ceilings. There were individual desks crammed to the hilt with ragged tatters of schoolbooks, miscellany. (The textbooks had a peculiar smell of glossy paper and were filled with dull-edged learning.) There were unused wastebaskets surrounded on the floors by chrysanthemums of crumpled paper. There were cracked ceilings and crumbling plaster and creaking floorboards and underpaid teachers. This was where youth was cooped up and forced to develop slick diplomacy and insidious wiles along with frittered time and a smattering of board-broad learning.

Hilliard, who was in the eighth grade and was thirteen years old, made a score of 135 on an I. Q. test. This meant that he had a superior intellect; it was known. His was the highest score made in the school. He was told of it publicly in the schoolroom by a

doting and well-intentioned mathematics teacher, whose prize pupil he was, and he blushed a raw-beet color while the other girls and boys looked at him in a solid phalanx, some with oohs and ahs of admiration, others with sneers of purple and green envy.

This was one of the greatest hardships ever tendered him, this sordid triumph of vulgar and ignorant intellect over vulgar and ignorant but living and human beings. He should have been very proud, he supposed, but it haunted him, the injustice of it. Here were boys who knew how to hunt and carpenter and love, while he only knew how to read and feebly to reason and to doubt and no more to love anyone at all, so abstract had he become. All the wisdoms these other boys and girls knew that he could not know! His loss grieved him.

"Am I superior?" his lips whispered in the darkness of night, and his crude heart told him over and over again: "No, you are inferior." He could daydream Napoleonic dreams of personality-driven conquests of personalities, he could analyze and control himself — to a certain point — and love himself, but he had lost the ability to love any human being save an imaginary one. He loved only abstractions.

Somehow he knew that the intelligence tests fostered one of the greatest lies ever told idiotic humanity.

He could not help wondering. At night chiefly, when those terrible subterranean desires and frights and lurid actions and horrors of the subconscious were unleashed, those demons out of Pandora's box

— when he was fatigued or near sleep or near waking — he could not refrain from wondering deliriously whether or not he was a genius. After all, this I. Q. of 135 meant something to much more learned men than he. If he was a genius, was he a flash-in-the-pan genius? Could he remain in genius world; would he finally be recognized as a world genius?

Sometimes he knew a terrible bliss of self-love, a rhapsodic egotism, which left him feeling morose and terribly guilty. A morbid survey of his dreams would bring him to the conclusion that he was truly off the beam and wandering in a Stygian darkness whose only light was his own delirium. He thought he must be insane. He got hold of books on psychology from the teacher's small scattered library and lapped up the uninspired rot, the intellectual fungus of psychology.

He had always been nervous, dancing from one foot to another with impatience, his fingers shaking when he had to hold a cup at a party (thus spilling out the liquid, cocoa or whatever it was), his voice failing him when he was called on to speak authoritatively in public. Formalities frightened him out of his wits. He felt like a worm at such times, unspeakably puny. He had always been so damn quick in his studies that his errors were mostly from sheer carelessness. He read like a blue streak of lightning, and he calculated like a blitz. On another intelligence test a year earlier he had made a score of 144, but on this one he had become rattled in the middle of it when the principal of the school walked noiselessly into the room and smiled fondly at him, and

it had taken him some minutes to recover his shattered composure.

Because he lived so within himself, so solitary in his mental adventures, he had those strange compulsions to break bonds of convention. He considered most conventions to be utterly hideous and depraved lies. Whenever he tried to use the commonplace flattery and shallow interests and gossip that made most social transactions glide smoothly on their lubricant, he found his lies all soaring to twist back boomeranging and explode in his own face. He tried honesty; he spoke his mind, and the strange blurts seemed to his anxious and conscience-stricken vision to make people uncomfortable, to lead them to shun him. And thus too was the truth made hideous and embarrassing to him — all because he must be so un-trite and selfconscious and damningly serious and butt-headed and vaguely imaginative. An uncomfortable boy, possessed of the malign and unwanted power to make others also selfconscious and uncomfortable in his presence. The quintessence of a worrywart.

Of such disease is greatness made.

He came in due season to yearn for the natural extravagance of relaxation, but at the same time he hated passionately what he most yearned for. He yearned for the devotion and stimulus of some lovely girl, but he saw none who would do, none whatsoever. (He dreamed of peace and horns of plenty and of an ideal girl whose being was soft and tender and yet strong, whose radius of understanding coincided with his own, whose radiance and lovemaking were

both melting and empowering, whose spirit was true to him and without jealousies and little fetishes — in short a girl who was the female Hilliard, as if he and she were a unit split asunder and united under their own powers again. Where was she? In a way he was always looking for her in every woman and girl he met, and his eyes must sometimes have shown it, for frequently girls began simpering and sidling in their peculiar selfsatisfied ways. Hilliard fought the physical sensations that would steal over him as he lay abed or daydreamed in loneliness, that tendency to imagine the sex-act — always now that nameless voice deeprooted in him calling the faithful to worship, calling him to the warm pulsing beauty of *woman,* setting him adance with passion for a fruition he dare not question. What a peculiar way the Creator had of setting these beings forth on the ripe earth. Sometimes when he was most bursting with passion for life and was frustrated, it seemed that humanity was perverted as a whole and that people were meant for Eden and never for reason at all.)

During his days he hated with venom the thoughtless good relaxed people, because their blunders never seemed to faze them at all, and they went joyfully on, these happy pilgrims, repeating and repeating the same old blunders, content to make of themselves traditional machines.

He also hated them for a far more subtle and lasting reason: their good words imposed debts — for every affectionate smile he was given he felt obligated, and he staggered with these debts, whose

value seemed to stretch far beyond the finite reach of the mythical billion-dollar bill. He despised the old careless tradition of "You take care of me and I'll take care of you." He seldom smiled any more because he learned to despise the immunity from social responsibilities granted for one's snigger and grin. He learned to snub people savagely who traipsed about in trite monotonous flippery (and yet he was very touchy, deeply wounded when he himself was snubbed).

Because he felt starved for adventure, because he felt that a great deal of life had been denied him, he read and read. At one time he thought that books held in solution all the beauty and brilliance and wonder any man's spirit could need, but the more he read and experienced conflicting opinions, the more he came to mistrust the printed word.

His contempt was often the contempt of the knowing for the know-nots, and yet he realized that a more futile contempt never existed. He often felt that social disciplines were dishonest, yet when he had time to reflect, discipline became the voice of reason against the irrational. The little insane fires that consumed his gizzard, the little furies, were often dampened by his great melancholy, his moist despondency. He was both insanely ambitious and the very extreme of modesty because he realized that he was such a fraud.

Sometimes it seemed that he lived nervelessly, yet more often he felt that he lived on sheer nerve-power, his nerves seemed so taut and frayed and singing.

He was torn between a desire to go "all the way"

wild, like a furry little animal, and a desire to dull all the insane luster of his imagination, to embrace convention.

He fought himself in a fierce and deathless fight whose shadows were larger than he knew.

The Human Being

Would you like to know how the town saw Hilliard?

It was the spring of 1940. Through the haze, indicative of the sea, the low roofs of the town shone with a mild luster. The air was tremulous cool mull, so thick and radiantly transparent, a mighty trunk of delicious gases. To breathe it was to live fully, it would have seemed.

Not so.

"Come to see me," coaxed Opal Lester, squinting in the sunlight and balancing a schoolbook atop her head. "I ain't got anything to do this afternoon."

"Whatchu wanna do?" chimed in sturdy little Tootie Vivax, with a scowl for the sun.

"Golly, there ain't nuthin' to do," said Maizie Mayson, the tomboyish one. "It's Wednesday and all the stores are closed." Thus the modern dilemma: what to do to spend all this time?

They wandered down the slow avenue. The celestial blue was for mystics, dead poets, and aviators. "Maybe I can get my Daddy's truck," said Maizie. There was a sunrise visible on each youthfully pretty face at these words.

"Oh," said Tootie, glowing effusively and spout-

ing her words in heedless enthusiasm, "maybe we could pick up Louis the Louse and Hubert. There they go now. Hurry, Maizie. We'll walk slow and wait for you."

There was nothing more fun than being near boys. Something about boys, the interesting modes of maleness. Remarked Opal acutely, "Hubert oughter learn to shave."

Ere long was Maizie whizzing by and around the block. She came up alongside them, grinning at the wheel and playing a comical tune with the one note of the horn.

"Git in," called Maizie. "Come on. Hurry up."

Then, with sporting Maizie at the wheel, it was speed and truck-capers that swelled the volumes of their lives. They went licketysplit once in a circuit of the town and then chased down the fascinating Louis the Louse and Hubert. This was the life of Reilly all right.

The little cab of the truck contained seat enough for three sets of hips across. Opal and Tootie had the chunkiest hips, so they stood stooping a little while the narrower boys slid under them, and then the girls sat on the boys' laps with many a blush and giggle. "Yi, she weighs a ton," said Louis of Tootie.

Hubert had intellectual pretensions. "This town's deader than the moon," he announced belligerently.

Said the wisecracking Louis agreeably, "Aw, why don't you package your corn and sell it to Kellogg?"

They beat it out the highway in the truck. As they passed the last houses within the city limits they saw

a goodsized figure of a man or boy strolling in the sunlight down the highway ahead of them. As they passed him they all looked out at him and waved awkwardly. Then as they went whirling away, a little silence fell on the group.

"Hey, that was Hilliard, wasn't it?" said Tootie, suddenly coming to life.

"Ain't he a queer coot?" murmured Louis, awestruck.

"He goes for a five-mile walk every Wednesday," announced Hubert, who, as usual, was in the know.

"Might be a good idea," said Maizie, who liked athletics and fair play.

"Aw, that guy's crazy," said Louis contemptuously.

"Yeah. Crazy as a fox," said Opal. "He takes Latin in my class. He's smart. He's awfully smart."

"He sure don't act like it," muttered Hubert ferociously, smitten with jealousy.

"He's queer," said Tootie dreamily.

"Heck," said square-shooting Maizie, "yer one kind of animal and the way you seem is another. You can't tell what a body's like by the way a body looks."

"He wouldn't be bad-looking if he'd get a haircut once in a while," said Opal, who was impressed by Hilliard's power over Latin. She had made an F the very first month.

"Great guns," said Hubert, trying to hide his smarting jealousy. "You got a crush on old Shaggy?"

"Boy, I'll kill you if you say that," flared Opal, facing him warmly.

"Here, here now," laughed Tootie tauntingly. "Hubert, you shut up."

It was Maizie, who drove the truck, who gave the final decision. "There ain't nothing really wrong with him, except that he doesn't know how to get along with people. Maybe if his mother hadn't died when he was little and his daddy hadn't gone crazy and he didn't have to live with those old people, he'd be all right."

"Well," blustered Hubert, "all right. But suppose he's inherited what's wrong with his daddy. I'd sure hate to be around when he goes off the beam. He might swing a hatchet at me."

"Ooooo," squealed Tootie.

"Aw," said Maizie, frowning, slowly, "I don't believe anything like that's wrong with Hilliard."

"Ha," said Hubert disdainfully, and that was all that was said.

Hilliard's Odyssey

After December 7, 1941, there was no doubt in Hilliard's mind what he would do with himself. "At last I have an answer to my questions," he said.

It would be good to die for social good, he thought in his youthful way.

At first the Old Man said that the Japanese would be licked in three weeks, the Germans in three months. The Old Man was getting old. The Old Man was wrong.

As the United States accustomed itself to the prison life of war, all that Hilliard could think of

was giving his life by living or dying so that finally these invisible straitjackets all men and women wore could be taken off.

He began getting himself haircuts.

He was due to be graduated from high school in June 1942. His rapid physical growth was beginning to stall. But in his mind he would never stop growing.

He began to make ready for his participation in a world war.

He studied for war.

"It isn't going to be pretty," he told himself, and sometimes he caught himself with a kind of dismay. This was not what he had anticipated, back then.

Mutt's Odyssey

Soon, as in the First World War, Frenchmen talked among themselves, Germans among themselves — and the British, the Austrians, the Russians, and all the rest wondering about each other, queried in tones of awe and quiet hysteria: Do you remember peace, when men passed through one boundary to another? Passed on the railway through Budapest and over the face of Europe? Visited some German rococo or Italian baroque? Passed over to China on the bracketed seas? How soon the children forget their breeding of the time of peace. (The wars are made in the time of peace.)

Perhaps we need our wars. Without them we doodle and dawdle and muddle. With them we waste and spend and wear.

Do we need the screams of the dying to force the remainder of us to harmonize?

Do we need calamity to make the turgid good men fight?

How we waste our wars, then, for every time it seems that our military victories extend into a new perverted kind of defeat.

We watched the birth of a new war like men watching the birth of a new star, astronomically. We were dreamers, feckless, dazzled, helpless as blind-deafmutes (on account of spiritual malnutrition).

Were we to be blamed that we were born, brought struggling and wailing into a world we never chose, a world of mammoth and insane scope, a world of Ivan the Terrible — fitfully good, frequently cruel, tyrannical, uncontrollable? Did we choose to be born white or negro, poor or wealthy, stupidly phlegmatic or nervously brilliant?

O, pah, we are all good men, and if we make mistakes it's because we were brought up wrong. Somehow things will come out. They always have. (This paragraph contains a summary of Mutt's basic philosophy.)

Mutt was due to be graduated from high school in 1941. He had planned for some time to join the Navy then, "to see the world."

Then Mutt found him a girl in Custanooga who fitted him to a T, he thought.

She was sweet and plump and fair, and she laughed easily, was a good sport. He soon found out that she was soft and cuddly, and that she wanted a baby more than anything else in the world.

Before long he discovered with amazement that he was very much in love and wanted to get married right away, had no qualms, marriage looked so inviting.

Right at that time the Navy was making as much music to Mutt's ears as an accordion in the hands of a monkey. He wanted to get married "so bad."

When he was graduated, he went down to see the oilmen on the wharves in Custanooga to ask about a job driving a gasoline truck. They and other business men were losing men right and left to the draft board. Why, yes, they would be glad to give him almost any job he hankered for.

Mutt went home to talk to the Old Man.

"You know, I'm kinda thinking over the Navy idea, and I've just about come to the conclusion I'd rather wait for a while."

"That's fine," agreed the Old Man.

The Old Man was looking bad, Mutt thought philosophically. He was shriveled and nourishing his idiosyncrasies. After all he was seventy-three.

"Maybe I'll get me a job in Custanooga. Who knows, I might want to get married sometime."

"Son, don't get married yet," was all the Old Man had to say. He said it in tremulous pleading husky tones; unusually old and decrepit he sounded. Mutt said "O.K.," and agreed not to tell the Old Woman he had even thought of getting married, as it might upset her. The Old Man was worried about the Old Woman of late, she had such anxieties and bad dreams and morbid moods to fight off.

So Mutt got him a job in Custanooga, and was

secretly married for three months before his child-bride began to show her pregnancy and he had to admit to the marriage.

Thus did Mutt expand into the universe, going toward his destiny.

A NOTE ON THE TYPE USED

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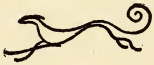

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